Maou na Ore to Fushihimeno Yubiwa Volume 2

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魔王なオレと不死姫（グール）の指輪2

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HJ
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柑橘ゆすら 魔王なオレと不死姫（グール）の指輪2

HJ文庫
HOBBY JAPAN

ねえ。この後、何か予定ある？
（第一話 彼女の決意）

ごめんね。……アタシにはもう
これくらいしか思いつかなくて
（第四話 とある夏の日の思い出）

ちなみに千春は現在、
お付き合いされて
いる人はいるのですか？
（第二話 共同作戦!?）
愛美とアイリスちゃんは
すっかり仲良しだよね♪
（……ぷいっ）
（第五話 祭りの夜に）

私の名前はノエル・ノース・ノーム。
親しみを込めて〝ノノ〟って呼ぶといいよ
(第六話 囚われのヒロイン)

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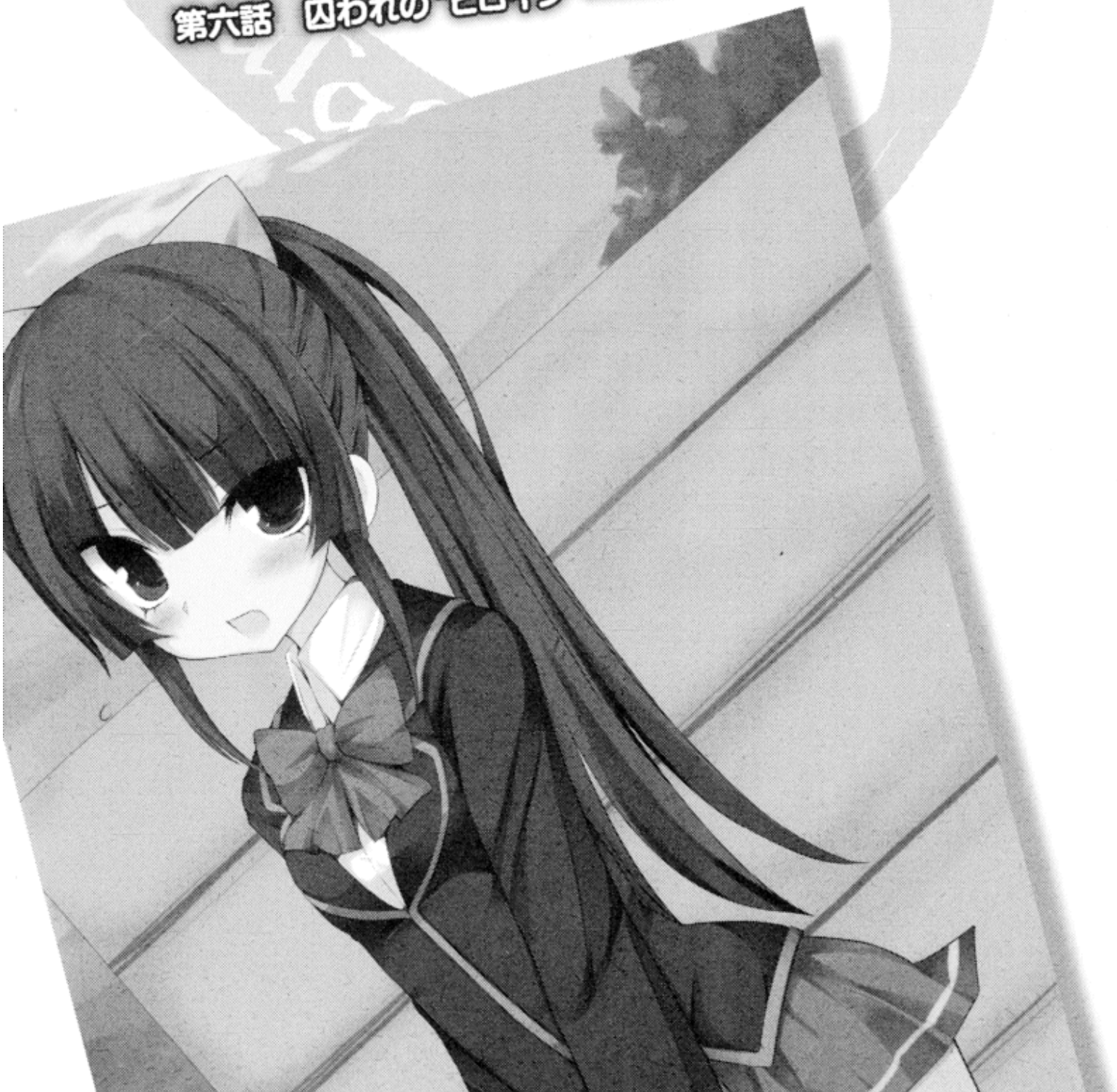

Prologue

In our town, Saegusa city, there is a large-scale festival held every year on the day of the Tanabata, the Saegusa festival.

Though I've said large-scale, I mean among us locals, not so large that becomes a national event...

Still, if you came and looked at this town recently, you would understand how beloved this festival is by the local inhabitants.

For example, posters were hung all over the shopping district.

Another example, people were carrying the indispensable bamboo grass to hang the *tanzaku* on.

After school.

Walking back home as the day comes to an end, I saw the town being dyed little by little in the festivals colors.

“Haru!”

I turned around to a familiar sounding voice and saw a person I knew.

Perfectly aligned bangs in a princess cut and a ponytail swayed by the wind.

The distinctively well-formed face had diminutive features that had established their owner as the foremost idol of the school I was attending.

Kurose Kyouko. The kind of relationship I had with the owner of the voice that had suddenly called to me, was that of childhood friends since elementary school.

“Are you going back home, Haru?”

“Nope. I'll stop a bit by the bookstore in front of the station."

“He—. What kind of book are you going to buy? Since it's Haru, of course, it's manga?”

“NO. It's past questions from the Center Test.”

“WHY?!”

She looked at me with her eyes widened in surprise.

"Why, you ask... From next year on we'll be preparing for exams. I think it's time to start taking measures."

“...Could it be that you're thinking about taking the college entrance exam?”

“I'm not thinking much on the future, but of course I have it as a possibility… what. You don't believe I can?”

“It’s not that, but…… what about your work as a monster tamer?”

“……ahh… You meant that……”

Those who stand as a go-between for monsters and humans — monster tamers.

By chance — I came to shoulder a duty upon which the survival of the human race depends.

Shouldering that responsibility…… how come?

“……So. There hasn't been any contact even after two weeks?”

“Aahh. Have I done something…… to make that person hate me……?”

Though I didn't know until after.

It seems that in order for a rookie to work alone, an authorization from a superior (in this case, Luka) is needed.

Nevertheless.

The days pass and there's no news from my irresponsible and happy-go-lucky superior.

But I have to agree that I have to be happy for working under a woman that's a beautiful monster tamer with unusually extraordinary skills.

With the free time that this neglect play leaves me, the only thing I can do is study everyday for the exams without a care.

“That person, she’s irresponsible to the core. Could she have even already forgotten that you were her subordinate, Haru……?"

“…… Don't say it, since that's actually possible.”

If you think about her behavior, her sloppy nature makes you think that that's not really impossible.

“Hey, Kyouko.”

“What's wrong?”

“About the monster tamer job, is it covered by the welfare program?"

“You don’t know about that!?”

“At least overtime… I hope they pay overtime work.”

"And as your job searching has come to a dead end, so university!?"

“…… Hah?”

I get down when I think about the future.

What kind of social position does a demon tamer have, I wonder?

Will I have to take a loan?

I’m thinking about that kind of thing these days.

Since I don't know many details, I'm searching for a side job, though it will be difficult, I'll need to change.

“Hey. Do you have plans for later?”

“……? Not really.”

“In that case. Will you come with me to a family restaurant? I feel like eating the Royal Host's yoghurt & strawberry sundae.”

“Eeerm. That's a bit……”

Don't tell me…… She's worrying about me….?

“…… I said that, but don't mistake my meaning, ok? It's not like since it looks like you're feeling under the weather…… I've decided to hear you out or something, so don't think it's like that!”

“…… I see, thank you.”

Once she let out her true thoughts, Kyouko averted her gaze with a “pui."

“Th-, That’s why, why are you grateful, Haru!? As I said, I only want to eat a Royal Host’s yoghurt and strawberry sundae!”

It seemed her momentum would make her bite her tongue any second now.

"....."

How stupid. That the day would come that Kyouko paid attention to other people's worries..... I've never even thought that.

That's right. Why have I become so negative.

About Welfare.... About taking out a loan.... I can't help but consider those things.

The choice was made by no one but me..... That's just how it is.

The July sun shone brightly over the asphalt.

I followed after my childhood friend's back, that now seemed more reliable than ever.

Chapter 1 - Her decision

Living under the same roof as girls is a situation any healthy male high school student would have longed for at least once.

Let's picture it:

Carelessly opening the bathroom's door one day and encountering a shower scene with a nude pretty girl.

Turning on the TV one day, they show by chance a commercial for a horror movie and giving the reason of 'since I can't sleep by myself' she ask you "Could you sleep with me…?" putting on puppy eyes.

Even I had a time when I longed for that kind of doki-doki (obsolete word) situations.

But, reality is so cruel.

If you try looking under the lid, the much desired 'lifestyle under the same roof' is full of terrible things.

Why is it like that? The silver-haired blue-eyed beauty that suddenly came to live with me shows a curious guard where she doesn't even show the "pa" in "pantyshot".

And instead of becoming frightened with horror movies, it's her existence that's frightening!

The ghoul, Zonmi R. McKenzie.

Since I shoulder the commendable duty of a Monster tamer, I can't do anything but being abused by the behavior of this arrogant girl.

"Welcome back. Chiharu."

Once I finished my work as an executive committee member, when I opened my home's front door, Zonmi greeted me with the looks of a vacuum cleaner-wielding apron-dressed newlywed wife.

"Eeerm… Is this some kind of shyness play?"

This is no place to play the straight man.

I don't know what to say, before the entryway there are numerous familiar porno mags piled into a huge mount on the "Have they just published a new O• Piece book!?" level.

"Since I didn't know what to do while I waited until Chiharu returned home, I decided to clean your room. While I was at it, I decided to dispose of things I deemed unneeded, don't mind it."

"… Why so sudden?" When I asked, Zonmi's eyes lost their light and became those of a dead fish.

"Yoghurt strawberry sundae."

"Urg!?"

"Chiharu. It seems you had plenty of fun this evening. Have you neglected your partner to have a fancy dinner with the Nephilim?"

"…!"

How careless. It seems that somehow or other today's events have reached Zonmi's ears.

How could Zonmi know about today?

Even though that question crossed my mind… As we are partners bound by the ring, we can pick up each other's whereabouts.

"Eeerm. For that, sorry. You don't have to worry one bit about that…"

"No problem. Since Chiharu is free to have dinner with whom he wants."

"… Ha, ha!"

Nothing costs as much as what is given to us.

Somehow it seems that if I don't repay Zonmi, I'll lose the thing I value next to my life.

Nevertheless…

Pearls before swine. A waste of resources

Telling Zonmi about the porn mags?

It seems that the porn mags that have invaluable price to a guy in his puberty, to her are no more than trash.

"… Is that so? Thanks for expressly doing the cleaning. How should I put it, my room, was it filthy?"

"No. Chiharu's room was very clean. It was a bit… artificial."

"If you put it like that, it seems you're trying to imply something…"

About my room being clean… That is, there is a bit of a meaning that I want to conceal the things I don't want to be seen.

Since I think that from back when I was in elementary school, I've tried to lead a lifestyle based on cleanliness.

"I'm quite thankful for your selfless consideration, but don't you think there's something mixed in that's not rubbish?"

"Ho, ho. If it seems like I made a mistake, pick the necessary things from here and bring them back to your room."

"That being the case, since the book is not trash, I'll bring them back to my ro… Ii!"

When I tried, totally composed, to pick up my bible of the 'Hundred top lewd athletes in the world', my hand was brushed off as if it were natural.

"Chiharu, that's rubbish, isn't it?"

Though her face was smiling, Zonmi's eyes weren't.

"… Sorry, sorry. It seems I had something in my eye."

"Is that so? That's good, then. If you had been serious, I would have no other choice but mince up Chiharu's body and take it out as burnable rubbish along with these magazines."

"… Ahaha… Haha."

"Come on hurry and pick up those filthy things. We'll dispose of them right away."

"Wait a minute!? Why do I have to carry them myself!?"

Saying that to Zonmi, her cheeks turned a fiery red,

"You mean you expect me to carry those filthy things!?"

She mouthed those words while looking down.

Filthy. That's a mean thing to say…

Nonetheless, I'm a high school boy that has hit puberty.

It's a sad thing, but I can't deny it.

… Ku. Sorry. Porn mags…

After this, I will absolutely go to salvage you!

“Mm. What’s this…?”

Right after I lifted the mags.

TUMBLE Something fell from inside of one of them to the floor.

Actually, you could say that I could virtually pick it up.

Looking carefully it was — a pendant shaped like a key attached to a silver chain.

What’s that that I could virtually pick up?

I can’t recall where I got it from.

However, I think this seems like something absurdly valuable.

“Why are you slacking off? Let’s go!”

“… Understood.”

In the end, I secretly put it into my pocket so that Zonmi didn’t realize and hurriedly followed after Zonmi.

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Kurose Kyouko.

There’s nobody who hasn’t heard of her name at Seiran Private Academy.

My high-handed childhood friend. Those who see her for the first time may not hold such impression.

The truth is, she’s a person that minds her surroundings in order to put off a cool persona not used to deal with people more than necessary.

Attractive face and figure. A woman gifted with looks and brains.

A prize beyond reach; owned by nobody.

Since she gives that impression, loved by those around her, it makes her insanely popular.

However. She’s actually different.

Her social disposition has become quite dry — because she mingles with other people while hiding that she’s a monster. The truth is she’s way more lonely than the rest — she’s nothing more than a weak girl who thirsts for other peoples' warmth.

And nobody knows her better than…

Kusumi Chiharu. Kyouko’s childhood friend since elementary school.

“Yo, touch!”

“Uwaaaah! Run awaay! You’ll catch the Kurose's germs!!”

Around seven years ago. Kyouko, due to her father’s job, moved here, to Saegusa.

She was still in her third year of elementary school.

Back in elementary school. Kyouko was subjected to the teasings of her male classmates on a regular basis.

Because of that, the Kyouko from childhood, different from now — due to her complex personality, she looked like an easy target for bullying.

Though she had fine basic features, due to things like her naturally curly hair or her big rimmed glasses, her appearance didn’t show even a bit of her current refinement.

“Sob, sob… *hiccup*”

“Ahh, ahh. She’s cryiiing. She’s cryiiing.”

“Th-that’s fine! She’s a freak. Let her cry!”

The word “freak” her male classmates nonchalantly called her pierced Kyouko’s heart.

(That's right… I'm a freak… Since I'm not human. It's natural that I have to suffer…)

At the time, on a popular Sunday morning *tokusatsu* hero show, fantastic beings like Kyouko were always being depicted in story as 'foes'.

In Kyouko's very young mind, she was vaguely aware that it was decided she couldn't become the heroine or the main character of the story.

"How can it be fine!"

It was at that time. The first time she met 'him'—

Kusumi Chiharu. She had known about him since before.

With outstanding reflexes, he also handled flawlessly his studies.

His looks that resembled closely those of a medium-sized dog full of charm weren't bad too… If you had to say, it was a clear strike on Kyouko's preferences.

Even while he didn't lack many special traits, his popularity among the rest of the girls didn't stem from that, but solely because of his unheard-of inside self.

"Wah, what's this?"

"Po-pool bag!?"

What made a clean hit on the heads of the boy classmates that surrounded Kyouko was an out of season pool bag.

Strange. That's weird.

Swimming classes in physical education have ended long ago—

When that doubt was risen inside Kyouko's head.

"Gueeeh! It stinks!"

"What's with this gas bomb!"

Coming from nearby, an offensive smell that made you choke.

It was without a doubt the worst stench that Kyouko had smelled up to date.

As if having wiped milk spilled on the floor with a cloth and then left it to rot — an unprecedented fetidness struck the guys.

“Hehe. My swimsuit has been inside for a month!”

“You’ve kept it there the whole summer holidays!?”

“Unbelievable… For reals. Isn’t that germ terrorism?…”

With the stench that couldn’t be withstood if used as a weapon at war, the boys were frightened by it.

“Shit. We’ll be back!”

As they realized they were at disadvantage, leaving behind a parting threat, fled at lightning speed.

— That was quite the quick curtain close.

Since the lad that had appeared so suddenly, in a single blow, had chased away boys once or twice as big as him.

“Hey, are you crying?”

“… Huh?”

She needed several seconds to realize that the hand that boy held out was turned toward her.

(I see… This person, he has come to help me…)

It seems this is the first time since birth someone outside her family has helped her.

“You… What’s your name?”

"Kurose. Kurose Kyouko… From class 3-2… And you?"

She knew his name from the start.

Nevertheless, by all means she wanted to hear it from his own mouth.

"I'm Chiharu. Kusumi Chiharu, From class 3."

The smile on the lad's face that showed his white teeth was extraordinarily dazzling.

HEARTBEAT *HEARTBEAT*

What's it. This feeling.

My heart is throbbing, I can't look at him straight.

Could it be love…? No. That's surely…

After all, this person—

(I don't know if he's cool or uncool…)

Actually, I want to hold that hand right now and get back up.

However, the smell of rotten cheese that came from the lad's hand greatly weakened Kyouko's resolve.

(Sob. That this meeting becomes my first love… Don't wanna…)

She can't recover from the mental shock.

Kyouko's complicated and mysterious maiden heart forced into disarray,

"… Moron. Moron, moron, moron!"

She brushed away Chiharu's outstretched hand and started to hit him in the chest.

“Uwah!? What are you doing!?”

“Y-you. When you’re going to help a girl, at least make it be a bit cooler! Why have you done such a half-baked thing!?”

“… Yeah?”

“Don’t mind it! From now on, take your pool bag home every day and wash it! I-I beg you, have a bit more of cleanliness… Since it is possible you are my first love."

Despite having run her mouth with impetus, in the end, she regrets her violent behavior.

(Uwaaa… What am I doing… To the person who has helped me, I’m being this rude…)

With her cheeks as red as apples from shyness, she stole a glance of Chiharu’s form.

Not even in his wildest dreams had he thought that a girl who he’s just saved would give him a sermon.

Chiharu made a blank face in puzzlement.

“… Well, sorry. I… Man, I messed up…”

As she apologized with teary eyes, Chiharu started to laugh as if he had remembered something.

“Haha. The heck, girl, look at your face."

“… Wha.”

“How funny. Kyouko, you said? If you don’t mind, let’s be friends.”

“… Yeah!? A-a-ah. Errm… Yes. Nice to meet you.”

This was the meeting of Chiharu and Kyouko.

Afterwards this day, Kyouko’s very life will take a dramatic turn — but that’s another story.

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“Surprisingly, I miss a bit those times…”

It was when she started to clean her room.

Kyouko, being what's usually called a clean-freak, as soon as she found some free time, she had the habit of ending up doing everything she could to clean her not disordered in the least bedroom.

— Today she's cleaning the shelves.

Full of determination, Kyouko started to diligently sweep the accumulated dust in detail, but, somehow — she found it.

Minatsu elementary, the graduation album.

That book, as if mimicking her own memories, had been put away at the back of the shelf.

Because, the better she could, she wanted to leave it in a place where it were not seen.

Were she to read it once more, the feelings hidden on the bottom of her heart would end up reawakening, and then — that was what Kyouko feared the most.

Since she's a monster — it's not allowed to have a human boyfriend.

The end of Kyouko's first love came at the same time she graduated from elementary school.

Even for an instant, let's assume that, luckily, the feelings were mutual… However, it's decided that that love won't come true. There can't be a Happy End.

Once my repulsive true form gets revealed — will he still keep being like himself after all?

… Impossible. If he's a hero, I'm a freak.

Us both are incompatible existences like water and oil.

Then, Kyouko came to avoid Chiharu.

The fleeting days of her first love, against her will, were locked deep inside her heart.

"Ahaha. Uwaa… The me back then was this clumsy…"

The first time she saw her ungraceful true form, Kyouko made a self-torturing smile.

Each photo brings her precious memories. The hand that turns the pages doesn't stop.

"…"

Suddenly. Kyouko's eyes got glued to a certain page.

It was the future dream corner at the very end of the graduation album.

'Pro baseball player', 'florist', 'attorney', 'school teacher', 'bride', 'manga writer', 'game creator'

Surely the kind of jobs children dream with packed together like in a dance and written in poor writing.

From among them, one is remarkably conspicuous.

'Stag beetle. Kusumi Chiharu'

Of course, it's his dream.

I still don't understand what's this guy thinking of.

Really, how could he write such a foolish dream? My head hurts.

Don't you understand? My dream hasn't changed since then, I still want to be a stag beetle! That's why, don't worry, your wings are honestly cool. They are not creepy at all.

…

…

Suddenly, it made me ponder his words.

… Perhaps he doesn't know. How much he saved me by the innocence that radiated from that sentence. It may seem like nonsense, but at that time I felt like I was treated as a human for the first time.

Not only did he accept the things called monsters, he kept acting like himself.

And that made me unbearably happy.

HEARTBEAT *HEARTBEAT*

“Eh… Wha…”

What’s it. This feeling.

Warmth fills me from deep inside my body, I can’t stop the throbbing on my chest.

That that I had sealed in the depths of my heart five years ago, has now once again come back.

(I see… It’s not a problem that I love him…)

How could I not realize such an easy thing?

After all — the highest barrier that worried me has been cleared.

Besides learning that I’m a monster, he’s accepted me.

It made me happy not having to endure it.

I can’t stop the throbbing on my chest. As if leaving a well, my restrained feelings are gushing out.

(How?… How come I’m still in love with him?...)

Heat as if my body is burning. I want to hear his voice, I feel as if my whole body is throbbing.

Without repressing her excitement, Kyouko started to roll over the futon.

“Haru… Haru… I love you…”

To cool her burning body, she hugged tightly her pillow.

She doesn’t know herself what she’s doing, nor she wants to know.

“Kyouko… Are you there?”

“Eh…”

Her train of thoughts completely froze. For an instant, she was under the impression that the world had come to a halt, but that was not what had really happened. If time had stopped like that, who could have saved her?

Suddenly noticing her father's figure, Kyouko regained her senses.

Realizing her own foolishness, *fiuuu*, she inspired a big chunk of air and,

"Wha-wha-wha-wha. At least knock, you stupid old maaan!!

Shouted loudly.

"No, how do I say it… Errrm, sorry… Are you busy?..."

"Do I seem busy to you!?"

"Sorry… Were you having fun?"

"That's too grossss!"

"I-I'm truly sorry! So, please! Please don't throw the bed at me!"

Possessing the power of a monster, Kyouko's physical strength was surely not laughing matter.

× × ×

Kyouko's father, Kurose Mikage, only came back home about once a week.

"Errrm, this… What have you just said…?"

"Yeah. Since it's very important, I'll say it as much as necessary. Congrats, Kyouko. Your new partner has been found. Furthermore, he's an exceptional person the Association has high hopes for. These are good news as no other. Go make the contract asap."

Letting out her emotions, Kyouko hit the table with a bang and,

"First thing… Currently, I'm officially on negotiations to make a contract with Haru. How is it possible someone else has appeared!?"

"Yeah. About the thing with Chiharu-kun, papa has gone to talk it over directly with the IMA and had it cancelled."

"Eh…"

"What's the matter? Kyouko. You have the talent. Even at such a young age, your battle capability is top-class among our clan. We can't allow your talent to go to waste like this."

"That… Doing as you please is troubling… Since I was to become Haru's partner… We had made a promise to become partners later…"

"… By later, how much are we talking of?"

Mikage's tone of voice became harsh.

"Don't you know, Kyouko? The time needed by a rookie tamer like Chiharu to get his second monster…"

"That's…"

Not saying anything else, Kyouko bit her lip.

Three years. For someone acknowledged as a low-level monster tamer, that was the average time until they receive a second ring and are promoted to mid-rank.

To Kyouko, a span of three years is outrageously long.

Since, perhaps by luck, Chiharu managed to corner a top-level tamer, he may be promoted because of that.

However.

"About that, once three years have passed, what assures you that you will be chosen?"

"…!"

"… Didn't' you said it yourself? To Chiharu-kun, as a tamer, the sensible choice would be that red dragon. From a tamer's point of view, between a Nephilim and a Red Dragon… Which one is preferred, don't you understand that?"

"…"

If you go by combat strength, Nephilim surely aren't weak. On the contrary, they are monsters of the highest of ranks.

That and all, it can't be helped to be overshadowed by red dragons.

The tribe of dragons is very coveted among monster tamers. Contracts with them are restricted to only a fraction of the tamers.

"Then, being such a talented tamer, in three years, it won't be weird that a powerful monster, no least than a red dragon, becomes Chiharu-kun's partner… If it's like that, you'll possibly be relegated to third place."

"Th-that…"

'won't be', she couldn't say it.

To monster tamers, they like to get powerful monsters, that's only natural.

Then. Supposing that, let's say, that he could choose more powerful monsters, won't he rather get them earlier?

(I don't want to be a burden to Haru…)

With blurry sight and fuzzy thoughts, she wobbled as if she couldn't find the floor.

"Of course daddy would like that you served besides Chiharu-kun.

To a monster, there's no highest honor than to make a contract with a monster tamer. Since having the backing of the Association makes a huge difference."

"…"

"Nevertheless, let's get real. From the instant you weren't chosen as first, your chances of becoming Chiharu-kun's partner went south."

"…!"

"You know? Please make a decision before a week. You absolutely can't face the other part in such a half-baked situation."

Without saying no more, Mikage got up. *Blam* At the same time the sound of the door closing was heard, Kyouko bent her knees, crestfallen.

"… I look stupid."

It seems she can't think of any alternatives.

The thing with the pact it's no one's fault but hers… She looks stupid.

Suddenly, Chiharu's reflection crossed her mind.

… At a time like this, what would he think of?

If it's him, he would probably face the adversity without care… He wouldn't get defeated by something of this extent. It wouldn't crush him.

Something. Isn't there a way?

To take this hopeless situation to an end…

"Ah!"

That instant. A diabolic and heatless idea surfaced in Kyouko's head.

It could work…

Contract usurpation.

Though, of course, it was not something Kyouko found commendable, she has no choice.

There're chances of success.

It goes without saying that Chiharu's current contracted monster comes from the ghoul clan.

The ghoul clan, contrary to red dragons, is hardly popular among tamers.

Besides, when Chiharu chose the ghoul as a partner, it was purely by chance, he didn't have the intention to make the contract.

Let's suppose.

If I could make him notice that my charms as a monster and as a woman are better than those of the ghoul girl, maybe…

"… Yosh."

Let's do it.

Even if I have to resort to this, I'm going to make Chiharu mine.

Kyouko raised her eyes and announced her determination, talking to no one.

"Be it love or contracts, I won't lose!"

Chapter 2 - Cooperative tactic!?

Recently I feel like I'm losing my dignity as a man.

Speaking frankly, I'm being made fun of.

And that's because.

The pretty freeloader ghoul girl that came suddenly — Zonmi R. McKenzie.

The devil-like little sister that lurks inside the Kusumi home — Kusumi Manami.

Currently trapped in the pace of these two, my life of being dominated goes by without issue.

Hey, hey.

What a situation I, whose catchphrase is "To hell with sissy main characters" and does not want also to be known as a "bossy husband in the flesh", have ended in…

It's an urgent matter that must not be left unresolved.

… Nevertheless.

A ghoul and my blood-related sister. That pair of selfish-to-the-core pretty girls that are constantly letting out sighs of 'Something must be done about this personality…!' are impossible to be kept in check.

In the end, I — today like always I can't help but being controlled.

"Chiharu. Are they going to celebrate a festivity soon in this town?"

Morning. While waiting for the bus in front of the station.

While standing to my right, the one who asked me that was Zonmi the ghoul.

Straight long silver hair reminiscent of white snow, slender limbs.

Her features without flaw, her dignified gaze gives her a cold aura ― a beautiful girl with the atmosphere of a cool beauty.

“Aah. You mean the Saegusa festival. It’s a big festival that encompasses the Tanabata Festival, a summer festival and a fireworks rally.”

The preparation being made in Saegusa city as the day approaches have greatly changed the town scenery.

Though there’s still time until Tanabata, the hastiest shops have already started to place the stalls.

“I see. It’s a festival overflowing with greed. By the way, Chiharu, are you planning on going with someone to it?”

“Nope. No one in special at this moment…”

“Is that so? That’s surprising.”

“… Izzat so?”

Could it be that inside Zonmi’s head I give an impression of having many friends?

Though that said, it’s not very wrong.

Zonmi, pondering about something for a moment,

“By the way, Chiharu, are you currently seeing someone?”

That’s quite the sudden question she has made.

“In the least. that’s not possible…”

Simply look at my usual lifestyle and you’d understand!

Even if I’ve been truthful, for some reason Zonmi’s expression harbors suspicion.

“Chiharu… It’s not good to lie to me. Wouldn’t it be better for you to tell me the truth?”

"I'm not lying…"

Isn't that because I couldn't get a girlfriend for 16 years?

"I see. I've got a gist of the situation."

"Hoo, so you've finally understood?"

"Yes. There's no 'person' you're going out with, because it's a 'monster' who you are going out with. Isn't that what Chiharu means?"

"Wouldn't it better be that I have neither a human girlfriend nor a monster girlfriend!?"

"… Muu."

Even when I explained myself without delay, Zonmi seems like she's still not convinced.

Why does Zonmi distrust me that much.

Or rather, that about a 'monster girlfriend' gives the impression of having a highly destructive potential…

"—Ah!"

I've just realized something.

"Could you be talking about the pendant?"

So it was that. I had totally forgotten that I'm wearing the pendant I found yesterday.

When I asked, Zonmi nodded with an embarrassed face,

"Yeah. No matter what, it doesn't seem to suit Chiharu…"

"… Perhaps a little."

I'm not someone who wears many accessories, for starters.

"Could it be something you received from a past lover?"

“Hardly, since as I’ve kept telling you, I’m a male virgin who’s been 16 years without a girlfriend.”

Don’t make me say it. It’s embarrassing.

“…”

“…”

“……”

“…… Wha?”

Even though I’ve said the truth, it seems as if the air around us instantly froze.

It seems that “male virgin” is a taboo expression to Zonmi.

“So it’s like that. It seems that I became oversuspicious. Of course someone that speaks with no delicacy… Won’t be able to get a lover. No doubt I must excuse myself.”

Zonmi looks like she despises me.

“… No problem.”

Looks like I’ve cleared her doubts, but… What the heck. This is surely very complex…

“Haah…”

I let out a deep sigh.

No matter what, I didn’t think this pendant would raise so much suspicion.

Do I look like an outsider to fashion?

Since it appeared out of nowhere inside my room and it surprisingly fit me nicely, I tried wearing it, but… Truth to be told, I didn’t think it would cause such a fuss.

Have I to conceal it under my shirt so to prevent someone else from seeing it, getting suspicious and causing a riot?

“Getting back on track. So, you are not going to participate this year?”

“Nope. I had planned on going, at least…”

Maybe I’ll go together with my classmate Youhei… I believe that, him being him, it seems that he won’t let the chance escape.

“I have been asked by Manami, like a demon, day after day, but… Going to a festival with my little sister at our age is of course embarrassing… I think I better pass."

“I see. I think it’s a commendable judiciousness.”

“If you’re interested, would you like that us two went together?”

“… Wha?”

As it seemed that Zonmi became momentarily speechless and had her mouth agape, soon after she became panicked with her face pure red ―

“Whawhawha, what the heck do you plan by saying that!? Maybe, what you mean with those words… Do you have the intention to be on a date with me!?”

“… No. Nothing so flashy.”

My intentions.

“Wasn’t only recently that Zonmi came to Saegusa city? You’re still not familiar with this area.”

Needless to say, my aim is that if I have someone that I planned to go with, it will be easier to fend off my sister’s approaches.

“… Th-thank you very much from the bottom of my heart.”

Totally in disarray, Zonmi took a deep breath in.

“Sadly, I must decline. Because basking under the summer sun while taking a stroll in the middle of a crowd… Is life-threatening to a ghoul…”

“Ah—”

That’s right, didn’t she tell me before? That each year in summer 100,000 ghouls were sent to hospital?

If it’s like that, then there’s no way around it.

And recently it’s been abnormally hot.

To the human-hating + weak to heat Zonmi, an event like a festival could be like hell.

“Then… Though I can’t attend to the summer festival, what if we go somewhere indoors—”

“KyeeeeeEEEEEEEEE——!!”

“!?”

The moment Zonmi started talking, a shriek like that of an uprooted mandragora was heard.

Glancing on the direction of the voice — a pretty girl came out of a trash bin placed on the street.

Big and round eyes like those of a small chick.

Nicely developed big breasts.

Her black hair, pride of Japan, was arranged as a ponytail at the back of her head.

Kusumi Manami. The one that has suddenly come out of a trash bin is my little sister.

“What the heck is that, oniichan!? I demand an explanation! How come I don’t get what you mean at all!?”

“Calm down, Manami. Isn’t it you the one who has to give a explanation!? That thing you are doing… Is it a human jack-in-the-box!?”

However.

As if it was only natural, Manami turned a deaf ear.

Instead, she criticized her brother’s humor sense by letting out “Uwah. Don’t make that comparison” in a small voice.

"Why, while you turn down my approaches, are you making an appointment with the zombie? That’s totally weird!”

“…”

I do it in order to have a good pretext to turn down your approaches… That’s something I won't say even if you rip my mouth open.

How come. This situation… How can I get over it?

It seems like Manami is in the right this time.

If my invitations were turned down and I saw the other party asking out a total stranger… Even if I’m not Manami, it wouldn’t sit right with me.

There’s no option… I’ll use ‘that’.

The last resource when in trouble. It tends to work.

As it makes use of Manami’s feelings, though I don’t like it, I have no other way.

Brushing away my forelocks, I struck a somewhat exaggerated cool pose.

“Listen, Manami. This is totally for your sake…”

“Eh…”

Manami let out a little sigh with a befuddled face.

"… Wait a bit, what?"

Yosh. Hook, line and sink.

My little sister's expression turned in a flash into that of a lovestruck maiden.

"I'm your brother, right? Since you are more important to me than anyone else… Ain't I telling you to harden your heart? Next year, you're also gonna be a high school student. Won't it be troubling to you if you cannot let go of your brother by then? I beg you, Manami. Make your brother feel relieved and make a single friend before then."

"…"

It's really something I can't endure. Due to Manami's bad habit of having a much-too-strong sex drive, she had no one she could call a friend in elementary and middle school.

That's why my words ― are my sincere true feelings.

Though it'll be good that Manami learns to not cling to her brother for a bit…

"Understood… If that's what oniichan says… Manami… Will try. From now on I'll make a friend to go together with to the festival."

"That's it… Did you understand?..."

Shit. I got some tears in eyes.

As I expected, if you make Manami listen properly, she's quite the sensible child…

"In turn, if Manami does as oniichan said and can make a friend to go with to the festival… There's something I want as a reward. Will you promise me?"

"… Promise?"

"Not now ― once it happens, oniichan. Let's go together to the festival."

“Eh.”

What the heck does she mean by that.

After going to the festival with a friend, double booking by going together to the festival with me?

I mean… Isn’t that completely going back to the start line!?

“Hey, Manami… By saying you will make a friend in order to let go of your brother, isn’t that putting the cart before the horse?“

“Pretty please! This is the last I will ask of you! I want my last memory of middle school, by all means, to be going together to a festival with my brother…”

“…”

Since it’s unusual that Manami asks for something so meekly, I ended up rejecting it on impulse.

Thinking about it… Isn’t this to some extent better than keeping being insistently asked to the festival?

I don’t want to say it, but the chances of my sister that has been a solo player all her life to successfully make a friend in the lapse of a few days… Are far slimmer than the chances of survival of an ocean sunfish’s offspring.

“Understood. I’ll promise you that.”

After talking with a bit of a serious tone, Manami, with her feelings seemingly overflowing,

“I did iiit!! Oniichan, I love youuu!!”

MUGYUUUUUUUUUUUU

Manami hugged me with all of her tender body.

Also, how much longer will you stay inside that trash bin?

Since the start, being hugged by my sister doesn't make me very happy, but the stench like dead crayfish that comes from her hair adds up an extra layer.

If you're going to be hugging, take out the rubbish from your hair.

"Chiharu, you adulterer."

Zonmi badmouthed me, with a glare cold like a North Pole blizzard.

"…Ah."

This is bad. Could it be that, this time, is Zonmi the one who has lost her temper?

Now that I say it, that's right. I may have been insensible from my part to promptly make this kind of promise with my sister only minutes after having asked her out.

Being these two the women most near to me, unless you are very careful, the troubles won't stop.

"Sorry. About this…"

"Jealous wench!"

By promptly making a follow-up, Manami didn't let me continue.

"Shitty zombie! Read the mood! As you see, oniichan has chosen Manami♪ That's why, get out♪"

"… Ku."

Zonmi made a face as if she had bit a lemon,

“How many times do I have to say it to you so that you understand!? My name isn’t zombie. It’s Zonmi! I’m a descendant of the proud since ancient times ghoul clan, Zonmi R. McKenzie!”

She rebuked with her usual catchphrase.

It seems that Zonmi being a ghoul she can’t stomach being treated as a zombie.

“Haa… Still with that? I’m fed up with that sentence!”

“Hey. It’s a problem that you are fed up…”

“Straight to the point, zombie-san. Aren’t you excessively close to oniichan despite being a newcomer? Going together to school every morning, you surely feel important. Could it be~, despite not being going out you feel like you’re his girlfriend?”

“Wha-wha-wha-what are you saying!? If you say that, then you too!”

“With me, it’s fine! Since I’m oniichan’s little sister♪”

“… Is that reason enough? If it’s like that, than I’m Chiharu’s partner. ―So it’s only my natural duty to serve at his side.”

Saying that, Zonmi showed the silvery glittering contract ring.

Some days ago, I formally established an employer-employee relation using the ring.

For that reason, Zonmi and me are wearing matching rings.

Contrastively with Zonmi’s face of triumph, Manami’s factions got shrouded in darkness.

“Ring… Oniichan and the zombie are wearing matching rings…”

"…Ah!"

This is very bad.

A switch has totally been flipped.

"I won't forgive you… Never, never, never,

There, Manami, with the face of a demon, had taken out of nowhere a couple of huge knifes with 40 cm. of blade length, and isn't she shortening distances with us with ferocious speed!?

Man… I don't know what's what…

With this you can't tell who's the monster.

"Chiharu, raise your speed."

"Y-Yeah!"

Zonmi was dashing while strongly pulling my hand.

—Zonmi is of course a monster, and seeing it like that makes me too quite the monster tamer.

Could it be due to producing magic power? As of recent, my physical ability has risen conspicuously, reaching a level that can't be compared with a normal person.

That's why — I don't have to worry about the chance in a million that my sister catches us—

That's what I was thinking at the moment.

"Hya!"

As I thought I'd heard a little shriek, suddenly, Zonmi's arm that was pulling on my hand — was severed while fresh blood gushed out.

"Fufufu. At last, I caught you♪"

From behind… No, wrong. It was from the front.

Before we could have noticed — there was my sister covered in the red of shed blood.

What an amazing feat, my sister not only defeated a monster tamer and his partner in speed, but managed to sever the right arm that Zonmi was using to pull my hand too.

Emm, where did she acquire such pointless combat ability?

Good grief, that's bad for the heart.

Had Zonmi not been from the ghoul clan…. Wouldn't that have been no laughing matter?

"Fufufu. Lass. How dare you cut my arm… Today for sure I won't forgive you."

"Bring it on♪ Everyone who gets close to onii-chan is an enemy♪ I'll chop up your heart and body!"

"…"

Taking an weaponumbrella from nowhere, Zonmi faced my sister.

My sister being my sister, she faced Zonmi with the aforementioned huge kitchen knives while smiling ominously.

Man… I don't know what's what anymore…

Ever since Zonmi became a freeloader in the Kusumi residence, every day has been like this.

Even if I'm so worried, can't I even sigh!?

My spirits are almost as low as when I threw a tantrum because I stained my newly bought shirt with curry sauce.

Paying no attention to those two, I carefully got out of that place and went to school alone.

× × ×

"Then, have you heard, Chiharu?"

Lunch break.

My classmate from the seat next to mine, Sakurazaka Youhei, asked me with his cheeks stuffed with flavored bread.

This good friend of mine is a man of the currently styled 'low fuel consumption hybrid' kind, who likes 2D girls and loves 3D girls.

"It seems A-class has decided to do caramel apples."

"Eeh. Is that so. Tanaka from C-class does frankfurts. And didn't Yamazaki from D-class chose chocolate bananas?"

"Yep. Both of them have made low-lifeness reach a whole new level. It seems they are using the confusion to make girls eat rod-shaped foods, and like that fulfill their hidden intentions of seeing them make sexy poses."

"…"

Regarding our talk till now, it's about the stands that will be set up during Saegusa festival.

A stand even though we are in high school?

You may be wondering, but to set up a stall is something specially regarded as part of our school's extra-curricular activities.

To tell the truth, the reason I decided to go with Youhei to the festival is the following.

"About your booth… It was yo-yo fishing, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Isn't it the best? The guys around me won't stop saying 'Isn't he too fired up!?', being no match for me."

"… As expected. Your idea is on a whole different line of those of the perverts from the other classes."

"!!"

As soon as I remarked that, Youhei's eyes got sharper.

"Ku, ku, ku. As I suspected. Chiharu… I supposed that, being you, you'd realize."

"… You overestimate me. Anyone would notice if he used his imagination a bit."

"Nope. Apart from you, no one has realized it.

That yo-yo fishing has become the best panty-seeing spot—!!”

“…”

As I see it, yo-yo fishing is the best panty-seeing spot owing to two facts.

First.

As we know, in the game known as yo-yo fishing, if you don’t lower your hips enough you can’t pick a yo-yo, but, on the other hand, girls strongly dislike to dirty their clothes by touching the ground with her butts.

For that reason, since while yo-yo fishing they can’t but keep their hips lowered on a halfway stance, that makes the perfect chance for panty-seeing.

Second.

The line of sight of the girls engrossed on yo-yo fishing, where is it aimed at… Of course, at the yo-yoprey before their eyes.

With this, no matter how wary the girl is, it’s difficult for them to realize their own defenseless stance.

By the way, due to the former, when you try to google ‘yo-yo fishing panty-seeing’, you get a truly astonishing number of search results.

Even if the monster affair has enlivened society… Even today, the world is at peace.

“Now that we are talking about it, Chiharu, do you have someone to go with to the Saegusa festival this year?”

“Still no luck…”

Since I was rejected by Zonmi this morning.

“So it’s like that. If you ask me with your all, I may let you man the booth for a bit.”

“What… the heck…!?”

If you are telling me that I will be able to see panties effortlessly… That's too good to be true.

"In that case, I want you to promise me something."

Youhei put on a very serious expression,

"Since you are with me, make it so neither Zonmi-san nor your sister go to the festival."

"…? No problem."

Though I find it very unexpected, Youhei's suggestion is somewhat easy to achieve.

Truth to be told, Zonmi has already rejected me once, and I doubt Manami will be able to make a friend before the day of the festival.

"… May I ask the reason?"

"Chiharu… Me being still your best friend, I want us to be together!"

Hey, hey.

You seem to be saying that if I went to the festival with two girls you'll stop being my friend.

"Understood. Though I don't understand why, if it's like that, I'll prevent those two from going to the festival."

"For real…! Are you serious, pal!"

I was surrounded by his arms and hugged.

Seeing it from outside, it gives a dangerous feeling, but even being hugged by Youhei, I think I kept my face from revolting.

Gu, fu, fu, fu, fu.

How long has it been since I looked forward to the day of the festival?

Saegusa festival? Now that I think about it, long ago, I often went with Kyouko, but lately the chances have remarkably diminished.

… Now that I think about it, has she planned to go with someone to the festival?

As I thought about that, once I reached my seat.

“Go-good morning! Haru!”

… Speak of the devil.

A clear soprano voice suddenly resounded inside the classroom.

Looking in the direction of the voice, there was my childhood friend.

The moment she set foot inside the classroom, my classmates spirits fired up like gunpowder.

“Uooooooooooooooooooo! It’s Kyouko-samaaaa!” “Our angel has come doooooooown!”

Even after Zonmi transferred, Kyouko’s popularity was as strong as ever.

No, I’d dare say it was even stronger than ever.

The source was the “Monthly Seiran[01] underground magazine published each month by our school’s newspaper club.

According to the same issue, over these several weeks, haven’t some of the core members of the Kyouko Fan Club (KFC) taken the banner of revolution, established the Zonmi Fan Club (ZFC) and now both parties are in the middle of a bloody feud?

“… What a fuss are these humans making.”

Engrossed until a while ago by the karaage roll she had for lunch, Zonmi expressed blatantly her displeasure without listening to the current conversation.

“Eeerm. What’s the matter?”

When I tried to ask, feeling an ominous premonition on my back, Kyouko blushed,

“We-well. I made an obentou for Haru!”

She spat those surprising words.

Kyouko put before me a humongous three layered… No, four layered bento box, then she averted her gaze while bashfully entwining her fingers.

‘Heh. Humph. So it’s like that? Chiharu and the Nephilim, not minding that I’m the partner, have entered into an unusual relationship.’

‘I misjudged you! You rom-com bastard!’

I think I’ll hear those two’s words anytime now.

… No, rather I want to hear them.

I don’t know what feelings do they hide inside their chests, but those two secretly pierced me with their glances without a word. As I thought I heard the creaking of plastic being broken, next instant, the remains of a pair of chopsticks rolled over the desk.

If you have something to say, why don’t you say it!?

Chopsticks have no guilt!

“… Yeah, erm. Currently, Kyouko-sama is intermingling with Kusumi Chiharu. Urgent, I request permission for bloodshed.”

“Yeehaa! Serves you right, KFC! It’s obvious our angel is Zonmi-san!”

“…”

The dubious students from next class came dashing, being as noisy as they pleased.

Not that it matters, but KFC… Isn’t that fried chicken?

“What the heck… How come? Why did you make this bentou for me all of a sudden?”

“Eeerm. That’s, you see…”

A change in the surroundings, the air was filled with tension.

The classmates watched us intently as they drooled.

“I-it’s the same work doing one or two!”

“…”

I-it cameeee!

The king of responses that nowadays only happens in games!

Thanks for the treat. I’m full.

Thank you very much!

“What? Any problem? Since I made it for you, at least be thankful!”

“Ye-yeah…”

“Then, what are you going to do? Will you eat it or not?”

“I’ll eat it.”

“… Fuun. Y-you should have said that from the beginning!”

“…”

Aah. Of course I’d like to refuse.

Nevertheless, If I refuse Kyouko’s goodwill, she could not take it well. I’m scared of the retribution from the KFC members.

I don’t know if Kyouko’s plotting something, but it’ll be better to play along with her.

“Uwah!”

Next instant, Youhei’s shriek was heard.

No one present at the site when it happened could do nothing more than stare silently.

Speaking from the results, Youhei, who was until now seated next to me, has his head inside the garbage bin and is letting out anguished screams.

A catastrophe.

It’s a catastrophe.

“Yo-Youhei!?”

“This is bad! The infirmary! Someone take him to the infirmary!”

On the seat Youhei was occupying until a while ago, now is seated Kyouko, feigning innocence.

Dreadfully, probably Youhei’s appearance doesn’t reflect in her eyes.

Since she has used too casually her monster powers, no one present has noticed her wrongdoing.

… But that’s only natural.

It has been so fast that, despite having the dynamic vision of a monster tamer, I’ve barely noticed it…

“Come on. You can tell me if the bentou I made for you is to your liking!”

While trembling as if there was a poltergeist phenomenon going around, she opened the bentou box’s lid with unsteady hands.

If I have to talk about the contents — they surely are of top-notch quality.

The fourth layer has white rice, while layers 1~3 seem to have been designed as side-dish areas.

Fried prawn. Hamburger steak. Karaage. French fries. Spaghetti. Pork cutlet. Curry pilaf. Yakiniku. Steak. Sweet and sour pork. Salad. Fried salmon. Mackerel with miso. Takoyaki… Etcetera, etcetera.

Like that, it was filled with multicolored side-dishes made to be well-received by men.

"Kyouko."

"W-what?"

"Could it be… You want me to eat all of this?"

"Yeah. I tried to choose and make only what Haru liked, but…"

"…"

Sadly, it seems she has no ill will.

I don't understand the exact reason, but since long ago her harsh efforts end all going on weird directions.

"Aah. Then. Bon appetite."

I carefully reached out with my chopsticks to the hamburger steak.

"… How is it?"

"Yeah. The usual deliciousness."

There's no problem with the ingredient selection or their passing over the flames, and also there was no complaint about its quality.

I'd believe it if they said to me this had come from a restaurant.

"Izzat so? That's good…"

Kyouko, letting out an exhalation of deep relief, gazed at me with a dazzling expectation,

Come, why don’t you try the next one? If you ask me, I’m confident on how the fried shrimp has come out…

She asked me as if it was only natural.

“…”

This flow of events… It gives me bad vibes.

I looked around looking for help, but each and every one of them conspicuously turned away their glances, so I couldn’t meet their eyes.

It seems I deserve it, it can only be called divine punishment.

"… What's the matter? Could it be it doesn't suit your tastes… perhaps?"

I couldn't get rid of my suddenly meek childhood friend, her eyes tinged with uneasiness.

Since it has come to this, even I… Better to steel my stomach…

Having made my decision, I, with tearful eyes, I gulped down the hamburger and white rice as if stuffing them into my throat.

MUNCH MUNCH *MUNCH MUNCH*

Resolutely, I kept chewing.

My stomach capacity has reached its limits long ago.

It's as if I could end up throwing everything up anytime if I so much let some air out.

However, I can't go and give up.

This Kyouko, what the heck… What was she thinking, making so much bentou?

I don't know the circumstance, but she wouldn't have prepared so much bentou for no ordinary reason.

That's why, I'll eat it. I'll keep eating it.

… After a while I could see the end.

Another bite.

Another bite… Only this last piece of pineapple from the sweet-sour pork and finished!

"… Blergh!"

Nevertheless, reality is not so kind.

Having my stomach reached long ago the limits of its capacity, its contents were thrown up in an explosion of a paste resembling egg icecream.

“Danger! Kusumi has been defeated!!”

“To the infirmary! Even if it’s Kusumi, take him to the infirmary!”

What. I see a beautiful river.

Could this be… The Sanzu river?

He… y…

The one who’s waving to me from the other side… Is it Youhei?

I see. You also fell in a very flashy manner.

Youhei… I follow your steps.

“Good grief. How can you be this soft-hearted, Master…?”

While I was losing consciousness, I thought I heard Zonmi’s voice.

× × ×

As soon as Kyouko reached her apartment, she buried her face in her pillow and hanged her head.

“…The worst.”

If that’s not the worst, then what would you call the worst?

The nicely timed ‘handmade bentou tactic” had ended in utter failure.

For sure, it’s the fault of the size of the bentou, I got carried away and did too much, I think I have many things to reflect on.

Then, no wonder, it ended up making him faint…

All the same, I should have predicted it.

“Hah…”

I let out a deep sigh.

Like this, usurping the contract is but a pipe dream.

If I keep it like this, wont I be forced to make a contract with the partner that I don’t want?

With Chiharu ever after, is that a destiny denied to me?

Thinking like that, I felt my mood steadily going down.

“I’m going to support you! Kyouko-oneechan.”

From somewhere, the voice of a girl could be heard.

“Who!?”

That’s weird. When I got out, if I’m not wrong, I locked the door.

Right now, no one should be inside this room other than me.

No one should…?

Next instant, *BAM!*, the wardrobe’s door was opened with force.

Following that, a familiar human came out rolling like a pill bug.

Kusumi Manami. The one who has suddenly come out from inside my home’s wardrobe was Chiharu’s little sister.

“…”

Unintentionally, I held my head in my hands.

I don’t know what Chiharu thinks, but what’s inside the head of this little sister that’s rolling there was a mystery.

“… What are you doing? Manami-chan.”

Worried as I was, I could hardly squeeze out those harmless words.

“Don’t mind it, oneechan!”

“Don’t mind!? Isn’t that a full-fledged crime? Don’t you have something to say about that!?”

“Fufu. That’s that. Now, compared with oneechan’s problems, that’s trifling. Am I wrong?”

--Wha…

Since it was spot-on, Kyouko was unconsciously taken aback,

“Eeeerm. What do you mean by supporting me?”

I asked with a somewhat forced smile.

“Cheering on your love, of course♪ Kyouko-oneechan, don’t you love oniichan?”

“… What?”

“However. Oneechan’s recently abused template of tsundere childhood friend, is it a successful approach against oniichan? Is not, right?”

“… R-rather, about liking Haru, I don…”

“Aaa. Yeah, yeah. It’s fine to go with that character.”

“…”

“You like him, don’t you?”

“…”

It’s not possible to keep a secret from her, so it seems.

“… Yes. I like him. I love him.”

Just when I voiced that, I noticed my face heating up.

(What’s with… This situation!?)

Why am I confessing my loving someone to that someone’s little sister?

Why was she inside my room’s wardrobe?

As the questions kept popping up, feeling that she'd lose if she thought deeply about it, Kyouko gave up thinking.

"Yep, yep. Let's go straight to the point♪"

"…?"

"That love, I'll help you fulfill it!"

"Eh,"

"From today onwards, Manami will be love's Cupid for you two! I'll teach Kyouko-oneechan about love!"

"Eeeeeeehhhhh!?"

I didn't understand the reason.

Isn't it somewhat sad that I have to learn about love from a girl younger than me?

"Don't worry. Since if you leave it to me, everything will be OK! Feel at ease, Kyouko-oneechan!!"

"Hah…"

I could only sigh. Since I can't reply, it seems I've given my consent.

That's weird.

Manami is a well-known bro-con. I don't know what reason she'd have to help me with my love.

"Ufufu. Now I can make Kyouko onee-chan get in the way of that ghoul's romance…!"

"You've let out your true thoughts!?"

I don't understand a bit of what's happening, but I can say a single thing.

That is, it seems that it's my fate to be completely manipulated by these pair of siblings.

Chapter 3 - Honey Trap

Since I don’t know from where to start, let’s go in order for the time being.

Before my eyes there is a female pervert.

How unexpected. It seems I was greatly mistaken.

About the being called female pervert, until now. I believed they were beings that only lived inside male fantasies, but that was a great mistake.

Thinking a bit about it, it’s obvious, but seeing that beings like dragons and ghouls surprisingly do exist in reality, there’s no reason why female perverts won’t.

Nevertheless.

No, indeed.

That there was a female pervert so close to me… I didn’t expect it.

“What are you doing…? Kyouko.”

Totally overflowing with uneasiness, I said the name of my childhood friend.

“Eerrm. What… You don’t get it?”

“…”

Let’s rewind and reassess the situation.

It’s lunch break. I was dragged by Kyouko into the women’s toilet at the back of the school.

Currently, in front of me, I see my childhood friend with her skirt rolled up and flaunting her panties to me.

I-I don't think you understand what I'm saying……

This sudden plot twist would leave even Polna•ff speechless.

"I can… See your panties."

"… Errm. That's all?"

"That's all."

"Th-that can't be all! Isn't there something!? Like feelings!"

"Why should I tell you what I feel when I see your panties!?"

"Ugh! That's…"

Being questioned, Kyouko became flustered,

"Uuu. Saying that any boy should fall once they are shown panties… Manami-chan, you liar…"

With her skirt still rolled up, she muttered something.

I don't know what's happening, but since I can't bear seeing her like this.

"… Understood. I'll tell you. Listen."

"Eh…?"

"Since I'll tell you my feelings on seeing your panties… Don't make that face."

"Really!?"

It's a deep mystery why she's so happy, but Kyouko let out a smile like a flower in bloom.

Ughh…

Really… What have we been talking about since a while ago?

A situation of being forced to reveal my feelings on seeing her panties… I really don't know what her aim is.

"How should I put it, it's repetitive."

"… What?"

A really big question mark floated over Kyouko's head.

"Aah. Errm. I've said repetitive, haven't I? I meant it as repetitive in the good sense. I don't think you should be bothered by it…"

"Repetitive in the good sense what!?"

"… Not the ones you're specifically wearing right now, those pastel color with pink and yellow and such with a frilly ribbon ones."

"…So, so it's like that. But, is it something that boys like, after all?"

"Of course. I'd say it's a genre with established popularity, but…"

"You don't agree!?"

"Frankly, I'm personally fed up… First things first, will wearing them like that make boys rejoice? Doesn't it defeat the original purpose? I'd say this sense of security is a no-go."

"…"

"So, if you first take the boy to a safe location, that's a weak pattern. Besides, I have no complaints against the staple genre, but do you only wear that kind?"

"…"

"Katsudon is delicious, but if you eat nothing but it, won't you get bored for sure?

To begin with. Am I not accustomed to see your underwear… Ah!"

Darn.

I was so engrossed talking about my well-liked topic of panties that I've ran my mouth.

It could be—that I've unknowingly hurt Kyouko.

I see. I lack delicacy.

How could I liken a girl's panties to katsudon… I'm the worst.

It should be at least macaron or tiramisu… One of those posh desserts…

As I expected, Kyouko lowered her sight and with her shoulders seemingly trembling,

"Uwaaaaa! Haru, you moroooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooon!"

With teary eyes, she ran away full throttle.

Alone. I've been left alone at the girl's restroom.

"Errrm. What was that?"

That Kyouko. What the heck does she pretend?

If you thought about showing me your panties out of the blue, then you ran away with teary eyes… No matter what, I don't think it's a sane reaction.

Both yesterday's bentou and today's panties clearly give me bad vibes.

But, since I won't get anything no matter how hard I think about it,

"Well, recently weather has gone hotter…"

Saying that… Is that it?

With that half-baked reflection, I directed a pitiful glance to the gradually shrinking back of my childhood friend.

× × ×

After class. While answering the booklet with past questions of the Test Centre; I just bought at the school library, once I went home, the sun was setting.

Being alone, I started thinking about many things.

About dinner. About school. About friends.

… About if I'd dedicate myself on being a monster tamer from now on.

I walk on the white lines of the asphalt at twilight.

If I manage to reach home while only stepping on the white lines… I feel like something good is bound to happen tomorrow.

I know.

I feel, however, good things don't come so easily.

Since chances are good that by tomorrow I'd forget about this, there's no way to prove it.

Even so, I like to do these kinds of pointless things when I'm alone.

"…?"

Before the park I've gone countless times as a child.

My sight fell on a single spot. A single girl was lost in her thoughts on the swings.

Golden hair fixed in rather short twintails.

A dull red robe that seemed taken straight out a fantasy world.

Those eyes were of a crimson that overshadowed the current sunset sky.

"Iris?"

The one there is the red dragon girl I exchanged promises to make a contract with.

Iris Scarlet Lindwurm. That was her.

“That voice… The tamer?”

Iris stopped swinging and turned her face in my direction.

… Am I overthinking things?

That face, is not of her usual haughtiness, it feels like she’s thinking hard about something.

“.. I see. It had totally slipped my mind. Now that I ponder, thy nest lays in the vicinity.”

“…”

Nest, she says.

When talking with Iris, her usual sense of Japanese language makes me nuts.

“By the way, Iris, why are you in the area? Could it be you’ve covered all this distance to come to see me?”

“Nice jest, coming to accompany idlers like you.”

“Haha…”

But I think it’s more of an idler the one who’s playing on the swings at the park in broad daylight.

“I have a reason for coming to this area. And that’s—to inquire about a certain someone.”

“A certain someone?”

As I parroted her words as a question, Iris’s eyes became harsh.

“The Monster Tamer of the Catastrophe. The name is Noelle North Norm. Five years ago… She’s one of the key persons on the slaughtering of my tribe.”

“!?”

The next instant. I felt like that name would easily shake the foundations of what was until now your usual everyday.

The monster tamers engaged in the crime of abusing monsters—

The Black Tamers.

Just the other day I fought against one of those Black Tamers that wanted to get his hands on Iris' dragon blood.

… Could I have been mistaken until now?

A peaceful everyday. A world at peace.

To me those are no more than a house of cards.

Not even an instant.

If they resent me because of last day's battle—you could say my life is currently on grave danger 24/7.

"It seems adequate to suppose our foes won't let the recent skirmish slip out. It could be we have found the trace of some unknown bigwig."

"… Then, Iris, what will you do once you've found that guy?"

"Thou dostn't have to ask. The moment I meet him, I shall tear him apart. Since to me, from the very start… That has been my objective in life."

"…"

Shouldn't I say something to her?

'Since revenge will bear nothing, stop it.'

'Since killing people is bad, stop it.'

If I act as an ally of justice, it'll be easy to spit out a sensible reasoning.

Nevertheless.

The people who can say that kind of lip service are the ones who are living in bliss.

I have a question.

Let's say, those lawyers and jurist that right now are arguing against the current death penalty.

If one of their relatives was murdered by a total stranger for selfish reasons, could they still stand for their beliefs with the same conviction?

Since I don't want to pose as an ally of justice by brandishing the prevailing view—

I won't deny her.

"… I see. That's good."

As I let out my honest opinion, Iris made a face as if she was not convinced,

"… Unexpected. Being thee, won't you exercise unnecessary meddling and suggest me to stop?"

“That’s the life you’ve decided on. Even If it was wrong, I’m not qualified to deny it.”

“Good. It seems thou hast grown up whilst I was not looking.”

“However, let me tell you a single thing.”

BRUSH I softly petted Iris' head and said.

“… Won’t you stop getting involved in so many unnecessary problems? Right now, you… Your face shows quite a lot of suffering.”

“Wh-what art thee basing that nonsense on!?”

… If I keep with that, she’ll end up losing her temper.

I pretended not to see it and got back on track.

“Because of thee… Hadn’t it be because of thee, I should have strayed from the proper path. Against humans—I was consumed by the flames of hatred. For that reason…"

I felt like Iris fiercely muttered something, but the sound of the night breeze drowned it and it didn’t reach my ears.

× × ×

Going back a week.

This is the threshold between the Netherworld and the Human Realm.

A group of men and women were inside an old castle that towered over a desolate wasteland.

“Then, could you tell me about the capture of code 001, red dragon.”

“… Yes.”

A man with easterner factions that bore the nickname of ‘Tamer of the Black Beasts’.

Clarie Shernfelt lowered his head in front of the masked woman.

“My apologies. It went well until midway, but… An unforeseen nuisance got in the way…”

“… Hou.”

“Kusumi. The name is Kusumi Chiharu.”

Anguish surfaced to the man’s expression,

“Boss! Give me one more chance, please! Next time, along with the dragon blood—I’ll see to bring you that guy’s head!”

Though the man pleaded frantically to personally repay the dishonor, the woman’s tone was freezing cold.

“… That’s not necessary. I’ve entrusted everything about him to Noelle.”

“!?”

The Tamer of the Catastrophe. Noelle North Norm.

Clarie couldn’t suppress his agitation after hearing that name.

—Hey, hey. that's a joke right?

Why the heck? Sending such a bigshot to engage a rookie…

“Boss… Let me tell you that that’s excessive. I object!”

“… And why may it be?”

“There’s too much risk! If you let out that monster, it will be literally catastrophic. Even innocent people will get invol… Guah!”

Next instant. A big lump of rocks hit the man in the gut.

No. Calling it simply rocks is not exact.

A mineral giant with a soul in its body—stone golem.

Obviously, it is a monster under the command of a powerful monster tamer.

“Onee-san. Can I kill him?”

That girl appeared suddenly, without anyone noticing.

Wine red hair like spilled blood, a black dress with varied ornaments.

Her features had a crafted beauty, but the only thing that engraved itself on the memories was her relentless glance without any warmth.

“… Guh. Noelle… What the heck is with this behavior…”

“Nothing~. This behavior doesn’t mean anything. Do you need a reason to crush summer flies?”

“Noelle… Let him go now.”

“… Che.”

Being reprimanded by the masked woman, she let go of the man with a dissatisfied expression.

“You bitch… You have to focus on pleasing the boss at all times! Do you want me to crush you here right now!?”

Even though the man hollered and reached his ring to his lips, Noelle’s face didn’t flinch.

“Clarie. My bad, could you leave?”

“B-but…”

“It’s an order.”

“… Understood.”

Commanded to leave against his will, Clarie, after directing to Noelle a glance full of blood thirst, left the place.

“Noelle. Do you know what you have to do from now on?”

“I know. Killing that Kusumi Chiharu human, right? The same old task. Go, me.”

“… Wrong. That’s a 30 points answer.”

“Eeerm. Is it killing him by beating the senses out of him?... Or maybe killing by harassing?”

“Correct answer… Will you do that? However, you can only kill him if he’s not as powerful as you—understood?”

“Yeaaah.”

GRIN Noelle made a wide charming grin.

The masked woman’s feelings were conflicted.

Kusumi Chiharu.

While possessing the body of a human; a tamer who housed inside it the power of the Maou.

If this fake-looking piece of info ended up being real—he should be put without delay under the control of the organization.

In order to pull the trigger to activate his chimera powers—a shock treatment of some sorts.

It’s necessary to corner him into a limit situation due to battle.

And for that there was a secret plan. Since, come the time, all the needed trump-card tools will’ve been gathered, there will be no problem.

If there was some king of factor of unrest—

(There’s too much risk… is it?)

Clarie’s claim has a point.

It’s an undeniable truth that Noelle holds the skill of a one-man army, but—regrettably, she’s very twisted.

Not having in mind any kind of thoughtful tactic apart from sheer combat, one could say she’s not very suited to this time’s mission.

(… What do I hope, I wonder?)

She was stumped at her own naivety.

Being him, he could very well cast a ray of light over the darkness inside Noelle’s heart.

Even knowing that was not possible, she still held some hope inside her heart.

The masked woman showed a self-deprecating smile, having fallen into evil, but still not having become completely cold-hearted.

Rock tribe: Stone Golem **LV**: 15

Physical strength: A
Power: A
Speed: E

Powerful rock monster.

Boasts a power that can destroy even a building.

Becomes dull when wet.

Serial number: 050

Chapter 4 - Recollections of a certain summer day

That night, I had a dream.

A dream that I was aware I was dreaming.

I've heard of it on the TV or somewhere. I think they are called lucid dreams?

People say that lucid dreams can be manipulated to attempt things like 'Let's do naughty things inside a dream!', but of course I'm not capable of that kind of skillful behavior.

The most I can do is to wake up inside the lucid dream and see the events from the perspective of a third party.

The contents of my dreams are mostly reminiscences of past events.

I don't have a clue why, but—like when I blacklisted the mail I received from the IMA, to the somewhat forgetful me I'd say it's very handy (it may be by chance that I remember things I thought I'd forgotten).

This time it's from when I was in my last year of elementary school—

That day I went to the Saegusa festival.

"Don't wanna! I… don't want to be apart from Chiharu-kun!"

A scream that seemed squeezed out from the depths of the throat.

At my side, clad in a yukata—seemingly a bit less stylish than currently, the Kyouko back from elementary school.

This was the place of our memories.

Midway uphill and removed from the core of the festival, a not very known spot that was perfect to see the fireworks.

"Don't be unreasonable. Even if you say you don't like it, nothing can be done against family issues, right?"

"But… But…"

"Besides, mom said it, right? Even if we move out… We'll be back in a year or so. It's not like we won't meet again."

Around five years ago.

Due to my mother's job, I was out of my hometown for about a year.

Thinking about it now. That time, how harsh were the words I told the girl before my eyes?

Back then our relationship was somewhat different from what's called 'friendship'.

That was… Without mincing the words, it was 'dependence'.

The Kyouko from back then was like a chick that took for its parent the first person it saw after birth, she followed me.

"One year is too long. Since Chiharu-kun is so forgetful… You'll probably end up forgetting about me…"

"Don't worry. Since I won't forget you."

"I don't have a reason to believe in those words!"

"I won't forget."

"Liar! You may say that, but since you are Chiharu-kun… It's in you to forget your promises!"

Ueh. How much do you not trust me…

But of course I think my memory is only up to about that.

"I won't hand Chiharu-kun to no one. I won't!"

With big fat tears on her eyes, Kyouko grabbed my sleeve.

Yup. How weak she was…

She hasn't changed in the least. Once Kyouko decides something, in that case her obstinacy won't let her budge a bit.

Once we get to this point, there's no convincing her.

What? Now that I think, if that's true… What was with that incident of the past?

How did I break through that situation back then?

…

……

Let's speak from the results.

Where the sentence I spurted to Kyouko that time is concerned, as it competes for the first, second rank on my dark history, was something that could kill me from embarrassment.

"Kyouko. What day is today?"

"…? What day… July 7th. It obviously is Tanabata."

"Yeah. That's right. Today's the once a year day Orihime and Hikoboshi can meet…

It's a bit like us two right now. That's why—let's make a wish."

"… Like what?"

"In short… Like this."

I took a tanzaku from the bag and started to write a sentence with a pen.

'So that Kyouko and I can be together forever.'

Gyaaaaa. My head hurts…

That's right, I did something like that…

I think I understand now why I had forgotten it until now.

If I remembered something so embarrassing, my self would crumble in an instant.

"… I'm glad. This tanzaku… I'll treasure it forever."

… Are you for real?

Could it be that Kyouko… Is weak against this kind of conceited remarks?

"Th-the truth is, me too. I was also about to make something for today's festival, but…"

Saying that, Kyouko took out a tanzaku of the same size as mine—

The moment I leant over to see what was written in it, my senses went back to reality.

…

……

That time, what was the wish that Kyouko had written on the tanzaku?

Though I feel that it was something I absolutely mustn't forget, that it was something very precious to me, as I've awaken from the dream, there's no way to check.

× × ×

Once I woke up—I was on top of my bed; all four of my limbs chained.

"Good grief. This pattern once again?…"

Sad, isn't it?

Though a normal person would have slim involvement with situations like this, to me, this… State of being bound by chains and handcuffs was a usual thing no different from a mid-morning coffee break.

When, sighing, I reminisced how things got this way—

I could easily pinpoint the culprit.

That was… Right after I finished my dinner.

After drinking the coffee Manami made me, my memory was totally blank.

In other words… It should be that.

Darn. That Manami… She always does as she pleases!

"… You've woken up."

However—

What entered my view—was an unforeseen scene.

There was the negligée-clad figure of my childhood friend.

… Furthermore, it's not an ordinary negligée.

The thinness of the fabric that clung to Kyouko—being a see-through material, if you look closely, from the gaps on the lacy weave you could catch glimpses of her pale pink underwear.

"Sorry... I couldn't think of anything else."

"Erm. What the heck is this for…?"

"Though this time I strayed from the usual pattern and tried to choose an adult-like underwear. Does it… Suit me?"

"…"

Ignoring my question, Kyouko asked me with uneasiness in her glance.

Let's say it clearly. Suiting her or not… I think it's of a level on a completely different dimension.

Sexy.

Could it be that until now I never regarded Kyouko as 'someone of the other sex'?

The negligée-clad figure of Kyouko is charming and has enough power to make my reasoning crumble.

"Strayed from the usual pattern, you say… Could it be that you still hold a grudge about that time?"

"Of course. Didn't you hurt my womanly pride?"

"If that's the case, then sorry. I've apologized. So put some clothes on and remove these bindings asap."

"… Sorry. I can't do that."

"Why!?"

"Why, you ask… Because then it will be a hindrance for snatching Haru's chastity, ain't I right?"

"… Ah."

I've noticed too late.

In this situation that can't be seen as nothing other than two people alone on the same bed… I can't offer any kind of resistance.

Eeerm. Let's cool our head.

Could this be… What's called a desperate crisis?

"Wait! Explain to me first what's happening!"

"Haru, did you know?"

Whispering into my ear,

"I haven't gotten serious yet."

Kyouko suddenly leant on me, covering me like a blanket.

Soft. And she smelt very good.

In a single breath, her face got closer.

We were at a distance where simply by breathing a bit, both our lips would meet.

Even if I try to resist—since my body is numb, I can't move.

Could this too be the doing of the drug? If I could move my body a bit, maybe I could break through…

For what it counts, Kyouko grabbed my shirt.

I felt like a carp being cut apart on top of a chopping board.

This is bad. This is bad. This is bad.

My first time will be a reverse rape by my childhood friend… It can't be more pathetic.

… Mm, wait.

While thinking on a plan to break through, a question suddenly surfaced on my mind.

Why am I so unhappy, to begin with?

Kyouko… It's crystal clear that, judging only by looks, my childhood friend is quite the beauty.

… No, let's stop running away by saying 'only by looks'.

I do realize she's truly hardworking—she's equally beautiful inside.

And that's not my subjective opinion.

Her popularity at school is enough proof.

Apart from her, there's no other charming girl that will say she'll snatch my chastity.

Shouldn't I be thankful? Wouldn't it be better that I, for the sake of future reference, gave up in a manly way?

"… Ng."

Right when my thoughts had turned into a mood of resignation.

Kyouko, sighing as if she had realized something, stopped the hand she had been moving until then.

“Th-that pendant…”

“Mm…?”

Most likely—it must have fallen into her view while opening my shirt.

Right when Kyouko saw the pendant I was wearing, she looked like she was surprised, her eyes round.

“Wh-why are you…”

“…Aah, this? It looks like a very old thing, but, recently, it appeared while tidying my room.”

“…”

Could this be my chance?

I have totally no idea of the reason why, but it seems like a certain fact that this pendant is Kyouko’s weak point.

Clinging to a ray of hope, I connected a rapid-fire barrage of words.

“For some reason I couldn’t get rid of it and tried wearing it, but… Does it suit me?”

“… It’s nothing. I don’t think that’s possible, but…”

Kyouko muttered shortly, as if not interested.

However. I didn’t miss it.

Just now, Kyouko’s appearance was clearly unusually agitated.

As soon as her bodily temperature rose, her hands and feet started trembling.

Why this timing?

Could it be Kyouko knows something about this pendant?

… No, we can also think of it backwards.

The attitude of firmness she had until a while ago seems weird.

For what reason? Being acquainted since elementary school is not for show.

She's not like a certain little sister of mine. Kyouko, by nature, is not capable of this—sneak love-making visiting as she pleases as if she went to buy an ice-cream from the convenience store.

"!?"

And, I did notice.

A single tear fell from Kyouko's eye.

I see. That's right.

At that time, I was convinced.

Her current behavior is clearly not on her own volition—

If I think it for a bit, it's obvious. When a boy and a girl love each other, it's not likely that the girl would engage in this kind of sneak love-making visiting as she pleases, I believe.

…

……

While it could be, it's no more than a supposition.

The bentou, the girl's toilet.

Both of the recent incidents Kyouko caused may be related to the current one.

—In any case, something must be happening.

There should be some deep-rooted cause to Kyouko's weird behavior—

Though my body is far from being in best condition, thanks to the long chatting, it seems it's become considerably better than a while ago.

If it's in this condition, perhaps—

By using the one special skill I fostered by growing with sad family circumstances—the Getting Free of Bounds technique.

"Sorry, Kyouko. I can't return your feelings."

"You are bad knowing when to give up."

She resolutely said over her shoulder,

"Have you forgotten perhaps your standing? If I felt inclined to respect your intentions… We wouldn't have got to this."

"That may be true. However, you too have forgotten something."

"… What?"

Cooling my head, I, showing off— said quite the cool sentence.

"My bad, I— haven't I for 16 years been protecting my chastity from my little sister?"

And, as I bent all the joint of my body on impossible angles.

CRACK, CRACK *SNAP, SNAP* *CREACK, CREAK*

That way, sounds like taken out from a manga echoed through my room.

"I-impossible…"

"Did you know? About living beings. Don't they evolve in order to adapt to their surroundings?"

"E-even so. A regular human… Better, any living being able to bend its joints like that—eeeeeeeeeh!?"

Kyouko was in a state of bare surprise before my shocking squirming motions suitable of a soft-bodied being.

Do-don't look at me as if I weren't human… If pushed, I'd say, aren't you lot better further removed from humans?

I missed you… MAI HANDO.

I was deeply moved by my arms that were fixed at my back by the handcuffs.

Following that, bringing the cuffs to my mouth, I bit them off.

"I see. I… Made a mistake."

Kyouko, once I managed to break free from my restrictions, sobbed and sighed while facing no one.

"Why have you been behaving so stupidly…?"

"I cannot say. If you knew, you'll surely become disillusioned."

"…"

Clearly having many things I want to say to her, once I saw her face, my words thawed inside my throat like ice.

"Let's say the truth. Not even I understand it. But, you know, even if I was making a mistake, if I keep trying without giving up, surely a way will open itself. That's what I feel."

"…"

"Aaah. This kind of half-baked one is the worst pattern. It's repulsive, right?"

"… You see, Kyouko."

The thing that keeps bothering her is not a skin-deep obstacle.

“If something bothers you, I want you to consult it with me. If it’s me, I think I’ll surely will be able to support you.”

“…”

Kyouko, for an instant, opened her eyes wide in surprise, but quickly abruptly averting her sight,

“I’m sorry… Since there’s nothing I can say to you…”

A word of apology. Picking up her uniform that had fallen to the ground, she dashed out in an unladylike manner.

…

……

What the heck was all that, I wonder.

I’ve known Kyouko for a long time, but I feel that being rejected so obstinately is a first up to date.

Looking in reaction to a big thunder, the scenery was blanketed by bullet-like raindrops.

It seems tonight will pour.

June 6th.

The night before the Saegusa festival.

Having an uncomfortable feeling that I couldn’t get rid of, I spent all night awake.

Chapter 5 - On the night of the festival

June 7th. Saturday.

At last, the day of the Saegusa festival has come.

What will be the impact of yesterday's sudden evening shower?

Today's temperature is 21ºC. Under the shade to protect from the heat of these last days, dressed in casual T-shirt and jeans, it feels a bit unpleasantly chilly.

"Mister. One try, please."

"Thanks for your patronage."

Receiving in payment two 100 yen coins, I was handed in return two paper fishing rods with a W-shaped hook.

I wonder, why are we blessed with this cool weather.

In the usual yearly hubbub of the Saegusa festival, Youhei's yo-yo fishing booth seems to be unexpectedly popular.

Customers are mainly elementary schoolers accompanied by their parents, but surprisingly there are lots of female middle school customers of age no different from ours.

Despite that. At first glance it seems there aren't any that fit our desired stats—

We have yet to fulfill our original purpose.

"Ugaaah!? There hasn't been even one customer with a skirt!?"

At midday, when no customers came.

Having reached the peak of his anger, Youhei, beside me, vented his dissatisfaction.

"Well, the temperature has dropped eight degrees since yesterday. Isn't it obvious that miniskirts-wearing customers won't come?"

“Ku… Why, if yesterday it was awfully hot, how did today became cooleeeeer!”

“I wonder about that too…”

“Girls are girls! They had to come, all of them in trousers just because temperatures have slightly dropped! Don’t you lot have any pride!?”

“… What pride.”

Not being able to follow the nonsensical contents of his speech, though I still could understand Youhei’s feelings.

The carefully planned plot to see pantyshots was obstructed by the uncertainty of the luck factor from the weather— On that, I have to agree.

“Chiharu… I will take revenge!”

“Why so sudden.”

“I’ll smash all those girls that raise the set temperature on the classroom’s air conditioner on a whim without reading the mood!”

“…”

Oh, Lord. Forgive Youhei, who has somehow strayed.

I dare say, under extreme circumstances where he doesn’t know if he’s angry or mad at someone, his feelings are in disarray.

The talk steadily progressed on a totally unrelated direction.

“Darn it. Why do girls overcome boy’s opposition to rise the temperature of the air conditioner, I wonder.”

“Don’t you know!? Don’t girls and boys feel temperature differently?”

“Moreover, what’s with that girl-oriented fashion that adamantly makes them dress scantily? By dressing scantily, not saying how can they protect against cold with that minimal blankets, isn’t there something called etiquette?”

“What you’re saying, well… I don’t really get it, but…”

At least, that doesn’t have any relation?

“And you say that being very hot is not enough reason for boys to attend classes naked!!”

“How much more will you stretch that topic?!”

“… That’s all. My bad. I got carried away.”

“Yep. No problem.”

“Let’s cool our heads by changing the mood. Chiharu… While I’m away buying some drinks, I’ll leave the stall in your hands.”

“… Are you sure? While I’m manning the booth, couldn't a girl wearing a skirt come here?”

Youhei, with his hands on his hips, let out a magnificent laugh,

“Gahahaha! Don’t worry about it. Chiharu… Without regard for all the pretty girls around you, you decided to stick with me. That made me really glad.”

“That’s why… Even if you hog all the pantyshots from pretty girls, I won’t resent you.”

“Youhei…!”

I unconsciously let out filled with admiration.

As I thought, this guy is unshakable, I feel a mysterious sense of security when I’m with him.

In truth, I only came with him because I had nothing better to do…

But since it’s gotten this far, it’s too late to tell him.

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Right when Youhei left me on charge of the booth.

“Ah. Onii-chan found!!”

When I looked in reaction of that familiar sounding voice, I found the yukata-clad figure of my sister with her eyelids closed in a >< fashion.

“He-hey. Isn’t it Manami?…”

Being greeted by my sister, realizing myself the stiffness of my unnatural greeting, I felt somewhat uneasy.

“Hee. Onii-chan is selling yo-yos in his booth.”

“I’ve told you… Ain’t I helping with a friend’s shop?”

“I know. Ehehe. But, haven’t you done something bad to that friend? I’ve brought the promised friend♪”

“Eh?”

Could it be? Not that can’t…

“… Darn, you should stop telling jokes from time to time. It can’t be you’ve conveniently made a friend on such short a—”

As I stopped on my tracks, I noticed the existence of that girl right behind Manami.

… Could it be she’s a foreigner?

She was a striking girl with long straight blond hair dressed in a cute pink yukata. Judging from her height, she didn’t seem to be the same age as Manami.

At that height, I’d even say she’s still in elementary school.

Even lined up with my sister, she gave no feeling of being out of place, she gave off an adult-like impression.

“Eeerm. The… Who’s that child?”

“What~!? Could it be that you’ve not noticed, onii-chan?”

“What should I notice?”

“Isn’t this girl someone you know very well?”

“Don’t be stupid. What blonde acquaintance have I… Other than Iris, there’s no one.”

“…”

Seeing my sister’s clear expression of ‘you’ve said it’, a single possibility crossed my mind.

“Could it be you are… Iris?”

Shining golden hair and glittering red eyes.

Now that you said it, she has some likenesses.

… But isn’t it normal not to notice?

She isn't wearing her usual robe, and she let her hair down.

With her eyes lowered, the blonde beauty nodded in embarrassment.

“Fu… Laugh if thou wantst, Tamer.”

She let out a self-torturing smile.

“… Why would I?”

“Someone like me that stems from the noble bloodline of the dragons, so lowly… I look like a human lass… Isn’t that what thou art thinking?”

With a glance of understanding, Iris looked far away.

It seems like Iris is not pleased by her appearance. But since to me it seemed like it suited her, I thought she looked cute.

“I don’t understand the circumstances very well, but… Unless you hate that look, isn’t it fine?”

“Si-since I like this kind of look…”

When asked, Iris, averting her gaze ended up speaking very softly.

Maybe there's some reason she can't tell people?

"About that, Manami will tell you♪"

GRIN

Manami showed a devilish smile.

"… Wha."

Iris, surprisingly losing her composure,

"Hu-human. Haven't I instructed thee to keep silent about that in particular!?"

"Iris-chan, did you know?"

My sister's face turned from devilish to demon-like.

"Humans, you know? They are treacherous beings. That's why. Shouldn't you not believe in them so much?"

"Th-Thou bastaaaaaaaard."

"Haha…"

"You really do as you please too much, sister of mine…"

That's some daredevilry. Not only Zonmi, you even pick fights with Iris…

With this and that—

I found out what lead to Iris coming here.

× × ×

"—And, for that reason, since Iris-chan is too cute, I ended up unintentionally kidnapping her. Tehe."

"Haah… Why have you…"

After listening to her story for a while—

Manami, heartbroken after the rejection of a date with her brother, in order to heal her heart, she headed to her usual sex toy store (there are several things to tsukkomi, but I spared them so as to let the story go on).

On the way.

It seems she found a girl in front of a stall for the festival looking intently at the baby castellas as if wanting some.

To tell you the truth, it is the case that that girl was none other than Iris.

It seems that to someone who has lived up till now in the Netherworld like Iris, food from human world stalls looks very charming.

Nevertheless.

Since she lacked human world currency, she could do nothing but to be at loss.

And then Manami jauntily appeared. In exchange for treating her to the food from stalls, she asked her to come together to the festival as friends.

Like that, that's the reason for this situation.

"I see. You bribed her to become your friend."

"Don't say disgraceful things! Iris-chan and Manami as of recently do get along really well♪, right, Iris-chan?"

"… (Hmph)"

Iris, with scornful eyes, silently averted her glance.

Seems like she holds a grudge due to the recent betrayal.

"… Muu—"

Being unable to receive endorsement, Manami, becoming sullen, got close Iris and whispered into her ear.

“(… Wait! That’s troubling, Iris-chan! You’re not saying what we agreed on—)”

“(Fu—)”

“(Is something the matter?)”

“(Ridiculous. Surely, dostn’t thee think thou hast tamed me to that degree? The nature of the beings known as dragons is that of superior beings that don’t get attached to humans. They don’t mingle with lasses like—)”

“(Understood. I understand. Then, let’s make a bargain.)”

Manami rummaged inside her bag and took out a beautifully wrapped candied apple.

“(Mmm. What’s this golden shining offering!?)”

“(… To tell the truth, I had reserved it to eat it later.)”

“Hey. What the heck are you two whispering about?”

“… Fu. I can’t but acknowledge it. I’ve spent an eternity together with this human beside me—we’ve been long-time friends.”

“I have absolutely not bribed her, have I?”

And what was that short give and take interval?

… Be as it may, if I look how happy Iris is removing the wrap and stuffing her mouth with her recently received candied apple, I can guess.

“Witness it! Iris-chan and Manami had become friends before♪”

“No, no. Doesn't matter what you say… I can’t acknowledge it.”

“It wasn’t fraud.”

“Not matter how much I think…”

I sighed.

“How do I put it… If you had to ask someone, it did not have to be specifically Iris. Wouldn’t it have been faster if you had persuaded Zonmi, who lives at home?”

“That, are you being serious?”

“… It would help me a lot better if you lot got along better.”

“Absolutely not! Spending all day long beside that zombie girl! I could easily catch her zombie virus! It could cause a bio-hazard!”

“…”

Aah. It’s good that Zonmi is not here.

These snide remarks before the person in question… There’s no way I can tell her.

“… Fufu. What an interesting conversation. Mind if I join?”

A somewhat frigid tone that seemed wrapped in coldness.

“Zonmi!?”

Speak of the devil and it shall appear.

In the direction of the voice, there was Zonmi’s figure releasing such a silent pressure that at any time we’d hear a thundering sound effect.

Isn’t this what’s called awkward?

Why among all girls around me… there are lots of these ‘unexpected places at unexpected moments’ ones, I wonder.

“You… Didn’t you say you wouldn’t come to the festival?”

“… Change of schedule. Since today the weather is bearable in the human world.”

"… I see."

Heavy clouds. Chilly temperature.

Today's weather that a certain yo-yo balloon vendor called the worst condition, seems to be just fine for ghouls.

"Even so, how surprising."

As Zonmi spoke with an indifferent tone, the atmosphere was filled with tension.

"Could it be that even the red dragon has come to this place—?"

"Nu?"

"With an appearance like that… Judging from appearances, haven't you got hooked to human world entertainment?"

Said Zonmi with a sarcastic tone.

That glance was filled with clear hostility.

… That's right. Though those two are currently in a ceasefire, some time ago Zonmi and Iris engaged in battle to make a contract with me.

It may be that Zonmi keeps her guard up against Iris.

Being recognized, Iris hastily hid her candied apple behind her back,

"Kukkuku. Thou seest, thou dostn't know nothing."

She dodged it while her forehead was covered in sweat.

However, isn't it somewhat sad to dodge it with such a clichéd expression!

… Since candied apples are difficult to eat, there's no other way, though.

"About that, Chiharu… Is the proposition from before still valid?"

“Why so sudden?”

“To tell the truth, since earlier, what kind of thing are those so-called human world ‘festivals’—I’ve developed an unusual interest. —That’s why, when I was invited by Chiharu before, it made me very happy.”

“… Is that so?”

“Yes. For that reason, let’s promptly go around these booths. Show me around the area, please.”

Zonmi continued with a “… This place is dangerous” in a weak voice.

It seems this girl is worried about me.

“Aah. If you say that—”

“**Wait a minute——!!**"

As I turned back while grabbed by Zonmi, Manami let out an ear-splitting shout.

“Wait a minute, what the heck!? I really don’t understand this!! Why has the flow gone to the late-comer Zonmi hogging a date with onii-chan!! It’s very weird!!”

“Aah. Yup. My bad… Since I’m sorry… Please stop taking out those knives in public.”

At worst, they could report us.

“Then, answer! Onii-chan, who do you want to go to the festival with!?”

“Just to be sure, is there no option of all of us going around together?”

“That is an absolute no!”

“Only that absolutely cannot be!”

“…”

These guys… They’ve said it in dubious harmony.

I don’t know if their relationship is that good or that bad.

…

……

Well, what do I do?

Speaking from my personal feelings, since going only with Manami is not an option, that only leaves going with Zonmi, but… No doubt, things are not going to be that easy.

If I choose Zonmi here, I feel that soon things will get messy.

No, I’ll affirm it. Things will absolutely get messy.

If I leave Iris and Manami alone with each other, I wouldn't feel at ease.

In some sense, they make the top one and two of the people more lacking in common sense on my surroundings.

Thinking about all of the annoyances around me, it may be better to keep them under watch lest they cause some kind of trouble.

As a result, I’m at a loss as to which option to choose.

“Understood. Then, let’s do this.”

The one who extended a helping hand (?) there was my sister.

“Let’s compete about who can catch the most yo-yo balloons and wager my brother!”

“… What?”

“Is that fair?”

“Wait a minute. Competing, you say… There’s no reason why Zonmi would agree to those ridiculous…”

“Understood. That match, I'll take it up.”

“Eeh!?”

“Why are you so surprised?”

“You sure, Zonmi? Did you agree to those nonsensical terms?”

“No. This time I have to give credit to her. Little sister’s idea is very logical.”

“Where exactly does it have this logic?…”

“Since it’s impossible for the pathologically indecisive Chiharu to choose one of the two parts.”

“That’s right. If we wait for my good-for-nothing onii-chan to make a decision, it’d be tomorrow.”

“… ‘roblem?”

If it’s about me, they agree magnificiently.

I see. When it comes down to what I’m thinking about, those two know it really well.

“Yosh. Then, we’ll start at the ‘reaaady, go’ signal.”

“Roger.”

“The time limit is five minutes. How about making a rule that if the thread we are holding breaks, you can no longer fish any balloons?”

“I mostly accept, but… Isn’t it unfair that you’re on charge for the starting signal? Chiharu, Could you be in charge of the signal?”

“… I don’t mind.”

“…”

"…"

The moment I answered, they turned their glances into those of battle.

As soon as both of them held their fishing lines, they firstly looked around thinking what balloonstargets should they catch.

How should I say it, Those two were shamelessly excited playing for free…

… Should I ask them to pay their fares later?

After that, as I unmotivately yelled 'reaaaaady, go', both of them started their battle fuses.

"Tamer… By the way, can I inquire thee something?"

"Yeah. What is it?"

"I have been curious about it for a while, but… what the heck are those trinkets called yo-yo balloons?"

"Eeeeerm. Could it be that there are no yo-yo balloons at the Netherworld?"

"… Well. At least in my colony they are unheard of."

"There are."

The one who answered in place of Iris, was Zonmi, who was fishing balloons with terrific handling.

"However… Speaking from the conclusion, it depends on the area. Since what's called the Netherworld is pretty big.

Saying it differently, there are cultural differences similar to those in the human world.

Though around the central areas, one's lifestyle is no different from that of the human world, there are still people who adhere to traditional lifestyles."

"… I see."

"By the way, there were where I lived. In my childhood, I played like this."

While giving that fluid explanation, Zonmi got her fourth balloon of the day.

That manual ability has been polished without waste, it's not something that comes in a day.

I see. It sure seems that yo-yo balloon fishing does exist at Netherworld.

"Muu…"

On the other hand, Manami was slightly behind having just caught her third.

Against Zonmi, who shows a surprising skill on an unexpected field, it seems she's up to a hard fight.

"There's no way. If possible, I didn't want to employ this technique, but… Handing onii-chan to that zombie, as if!…"

"Fufu. What a sore loser. Do you think you can still turn the tables with this difference in balloons caught?"

"That… We won't know until I try! I absolutely won't give up till the very end! Ey!"

"!? That technique, could it be…"

Suddenly, Zonmi showed astonishment in front of the unleashed master technique.

Be that as it may, those two are very lively.

"It cannot be. Something like fishing two balloons at the same time… The fishing paper cannot possibly support the weight of the balloons…"

"Fufu. She can't be catching two at a time! Come on! This little zombie doesn't understand!"

Hey, hey.

"… Ku. Don't talk in a grown-up fashion."

"Come on. The true showdown starts now! I haven't been playing with onii-chan's balls since five just for show♪"

"… Won't those words raise many misunderstandings?"

Like mistaking it for ‘I’ve been playing ball games with onii-chan since I was five’.

“Fufu. It seems I have no room to go easy. Should I really go at full strength, little sister?”

“… Mu. What do you mean?”

“Even so, it’s not easy to be a march to me when balls are involved!”

“Th-that technique, could it be—!?”

From here on—I think both of them will engage in a great showdown without giving up an inch.

Perhaps. Surely. I feel.

Why can’t I say it with certainty—

That way. As a result of their absurdly heated up showdown, surely it would be a critical hit if Youhei returned with that timing.

If I told I didn’t expect it, it’d be a lie—

A rose-colored scenery unfolded before my eyes—the defenseless figures of two pretty girls.

Hey, hey. Are you lying?

That usually ridiculously on guard Zonmi that doesn’t even show the p in pantyflash… I’d say, the showdown in front of me may be dulling her awareness.

Her cautiousness had vanished like smoke.

The color was light blue.

Personally, when you talk to me about light blue what crosses my head are panties with light-blue and white horizontal stripes—the so-called striped panties, but of course the straight-laced Zonmi won’t wear that kind of underwear fully aimed to moe.

Nevertheless.

Better than striped panties, I find these more charming.

The panties that Zonmi is wearing are rare jewels arranged with the orthodox white lace, but here they had an elegant yet oriental—irresistible charm.

If I had to liken Zonmi's panties to something… I know.

An oasis in the middle of the desert!

For starters, the raw material is outstandingly good, but Zonmi's pants that don't forget tidiness as a standard, have something that strikes to the heart of the people of this generation of societal stress.

And then, let's try looking at Manami.

Though Manami usually is totally erotic and gives off a smell that would draw away a narcotic inspection dog, being like Zonmi before absorbed on the showdown, she doesn't look like she notices anything this way.

Let's confess it.

Being rude, I shouldn't be especially glad to see my sister's panties when she would show them to me anytime I asked, but… Today is different.

For some reason… In this situation where I can take a peep without the other party noticing, it awakes a tremendously pleasant sensation in me.

Now that I think about it, before, when I ogled Kyouko's panties in the girl's toilet, it didn't arouse such excitement in me.

I'm grateful to you, Manami.

Thanks to you… I could take a step closer to the psychology of eros.

You've made me keenly realize that immorality is eroticism's best spice .

The color was black.

As expected, you may think.

Probably… No absolutely. My little sister, unlike Zonmi, isn't suited to innocent underwear. On the contrary, attacking me while wearing innocent underwear—the so-called *gap-moe* is a possibility, but naturally the risk is high.

Thinking about it, I'd say it's a risky choice.

If I had to liken Manami's panties to something… I know.

A black hole from outer space!

As you think there's no possible way in front of you, if you make a bad step—they have tremendous suction power.

You will be sucked toward a social death!

They have a dangerous borderline charm that no one can imitate. What the heck am I saying. I want to die.

I don't know if it was answering my wish, but something came flying with good energy against my face.

"Guhah!?"

I unconsciously let out in a pathetic voice.

Looking at what was rolling on the ground, It was what was inside ramune bottles.

"Chiharu… What the heck is this…"

… What a bad timing.

Raising my face, isn't that Youhei glaring at me with the face of a Rakshasa demon as if I was his family enemy?

"Youhei… Welcome back…"

As I said those carefully selected words, Youhei seemed to inhale a big chunk of air.

"Be careful! Zonmi-san, Little sister-san, this ero-kappa, isn't he peeping inside your skirts!?"

This guy… He instantly sold out his friend!?

Like usual, he's a fellow that changes his allegiances very easily.

"Wha" "Eh"

Engaged in the height of their battle, Zonmi and Manami were left for a moment with their mouths agape and expressions not understanding, but they soon realized the defenseless of their stance and, with their faces bright red, and pulling down the hems of their skirts,

"Chiharu… Until what lengths will you…"

"That's mean onii-chan… If you asked… I would've show you to your hearts content…"

"Youhei, bastard. You promised! That you wouldn't resent me if I hogged all of the pantyshots!!"

"Shut up, sex offender! The one who broke his promise first was you! As if Zonmi-san and little sister-san weren't enough, you've just added a golden-haired loli as a harem member!"

"Ugh. Th-This. It's not what it seems."

"Ugaaa

“Well. What the heck is this?… Why don’t you explain it in detail? You… Perverted Daimaou!”

“…”

I take back what I said. Thinking about it with a cool head, I did something bad.

Never and nowhere, evil has never prospered.

After that, being harshly reprimanded I was made to bitterly realize that ‘… In this world there’s no way things so good can be true.

× × ×

And then.

We had normal fun at the Saegusa festival.

About the incident from before, I was temporarily let out on parole under the single condition of “Today all day it’s my treat, you can eat anything you want to your heart’s content”.

Eh? Only that?

Well, you may have doubts, but I’d say the crux is on the words ‘on parole’. I believe they are currently gathering evidence.

First of all, we went to make the prayer that makes this festival’s main event.

Couples, parents with children, some people I think they form a school group and so were lined up before the shrine, so we ended up waiting 30 minutes for our tanzaku.

Once we received our wishing papers from priestess I’d say they were part-timers, we promptly went to hang them on the provided trees.

By the way, I’ll introduce what we all wrote.

Let my master become a top-class monster tamer. Zonmi

Huuum. As expected, ain't that what Zonmi would say?

I think that, since we are at a festival, you could have written more lively things, but even here you show an honor student-like attitude.

Make my stature grow taller. I command thee. Iris

Why a command!?

Couldn't you make it look a bit more like a wish…

However, what a surprise. Iris is concerned about her height…

Onii-chan and I have become one in body and soul. Manami

Why past tense!?

… Could it be that Manami burns with rivalry against the lovey-doveyness of Orihime and Hikoboshi?

Even if it's like that, you shouldn't made things up!

Let all the reajuus, if possible, suffer horrible deaths. Y

By chance, that kind of tanzaku entered my sight.

It seems it's written on a fashion so that expressly only the initial is used, but… Isn't this one clearly Youhei's!?

And, this most important tanzaku of mine―

Let everyone spend their lives with happy faces. Chiharu

Even if I say so myself, isn't it too immature?

I'd rather write a wish that is a bit more material―more mundane, but I felt it wouldn't fit this formal a place.

Since I feared the girl's stares, I felt it was safer to write something harmless.

And with this and that.

Having hung our tanzaku and gone around the stalls, we made our way to the river bank to see the closing event―the fireworks show.

Really, it would be good if there were seats left, but something so convenient is bound to not happen.

We chose the top of a suitable set of stone steps.

Despite there still being an hour before the start of the show, the area around the river was already crowded.

"What's the matter? You've been looking disheartened for a while."

Looking up to the starless night sky of the city area, Zonmi, who was sitting besides me, asked with a meek expression.

"… I'm only a bit tired."

I won't lie.

In fact, the tiredness from going around the stalls all day long may be part of the reason.

… No, wrong.

After all, I—can't do anything other than worrying.

I have since last night been unable to contact Kyouko—

Could it be she has normally attended the festival?

That's what I hope, but it seems unlikely.

While I was going around the booths with the girls, I kept looking around, but I couldn't find her.

This was not a very big neighborhood; you could search it entirely in a day.

Had Kyouko come to the festival, I'd surely have found her.

In that case she—where and what was she doing?

I somehow picture she's crying alone, and it becomes an unbearable feeling.

"No way, is it."

"… What?"

"Since it's Chiharu, perhaps—are you thinking about the missing Nephilim?"

"…"

"As I thought, right on the mark? That she alone among all of us is missing—it's unnatural."

"That may be, but… Why did you know what I was thinking about?"

"Don't look down on us. Could it be—you thought we didn't notice?"

“What thing?”

Manami and Iris, sitting near, exchanged glances and smiled bitterly,

“Onii-chan has been looking around restlessly all day long♪”

“—It’s impossible to keep any secret before me.”

“…”

Holy cow.

Do I have a face so easy to read?

It seems they’ve found out I’ve been all day long looking for Kyouko.

“What about I try to contact the Nephilim right now?”

“… Truth is, I’ve been calling her since yesterday, but it won’t connect.”

“In that case, why don’t you go directly to her home? There’s still more than 30 minutes until the fireworks. If you go now, won’t you make it in time?”

“!? I see. I still had that?”

If phone calls won’t connect, I can go directly to her home.

Living in this time of cell-phone correspondence, that choice slipped my mind.

“Even so, it’s very weird.”

“What?”

“That each and everyone of you read my mind. It can’t be that all of you have spent all day looking at my face.”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“… Oi. Why the sudden silence?”

“Really, you, until what lengths will you…”

Zonmi, sighing deeply with a perplexed expression,

“Go now. Because later it will be a bother to scold that outcast Nephilim.”

“… Understood. Thanks.”

With a word of thanks, I thoroughly started to run along the riverside.

I see. That’s right.

If we are all gathered, that only her is missing… It’s not natural that someone seems to be excluded from the group alone.

If we come together to the festival, it won’t be difficult to make a chance to strike a talk with her.

And then I could ask her about last night.

And then everything will go smoothly.

The me right now unconsciously thought those things.

Chapter 6 - Captured "heroine"

Running at full speed, I could see Kyouko's apartment in less than five minutes.

That's really weird.

If I'm not wrong, I think I was a distance of 2-3 kilometres from my starting point, but… This watch, could it be broken?

If I lose my job as a monster tamer… I may join a short-distance running team.

I was starting to think about it.

When I received mail from Kyouko on my cellphone—

If you value her life, come alone to the designed point.

I first thought it was spam mail.

For starters, being that the contents were something so crazy, it made me think it hadn't come from Kyouko.

However, once I opened the attached file, I fell into the abyss of despair.

"… What the heck. This…"

Displayed on my cell's screen, was Kyouko, unconscious and with blood oozing from her head.

Tied to a tree with thick ropes, she could not even twitch a finger.

"…Ku."

Who has done this terrible…

Tightly clutching my fists to the point of bleeding, forgetting myself with rage, I managed to keep myself in check.

Let’s think it over calmly. Getting angry here won’t solve anything.

And besides—I have to first decide how to save Kyouko.

For starters, what’s the aim of the sender of this mail?

Since he took Kyouko captive, and then expressly contacted me, it’s safe to think he’s somewhat related to monster tamers, but…

Who the heck is he? What’s his aim?

… Only one. I happen to know about an incident like this one.

The evil organization that abuses monsters—Black Tamers.

If it’s those guys… Chances are high they could pull off an incident like this.

From the attached image, I could guess Kyouko’s whereabouts.

It’s a high place from where you can have an unbroken view of Saegusa city’s landscape—the best spot to watch fireworks from. It was the place I’d dreamt of before.

Well, what do I do?

I have two options to choose from.

That is, do I give into the culprit’s demand and head there alone? Or do I go back and ask for help from Zonmi and the rest?

If I think first about my own safety, undoubtedly the latter.

However, is that really right?

I can’t rule out that Kyouko will be harmed if I disregard the culprit’s demands.

Once it comes to it, I can also employ summon.

It’s never too late to ask for help even if I get in a pinch. Anyhow, right now Kyouko’s safety comes first.

… I’ve more or less decided what to do.

No problem. It's totally not safe, but rather than hoping to converse with the culprit, it's simply to prevent Kyouko from suffering harm.

This time alone I'm grateful that my body is so far off from a human's…

… I feel that the me right now can run even faster than when I came here.

Loosening the grip on my fists, I headed full speed toward the high place where Kyouko was being held captive.

× × ×

That place was located after crossing over a not very well-known mountain path.

The people who knew of it were few even among the locals. Talking about people who used it, it was mostly used as a morning walk course by the elderly.

"… Good. Are you unharmed?"

"Haru… Why are you…!?"

As soon as Kyouko saw my figure, she opened wide her eyes in surprise, but, soon, once her gaze fell on 'that', she started trembling with fear.

"How pleasant♡ You've come alone as we agreed."

"You? The one who sent the mail…"

"That's correct. My name is Noelle. Noelle North Norm. Feel free to call me Nono."

"…"

Surprising.

The tamer I fought before looked like 5-6 years older than me, but this one looked younger than me.

And, moreover, a girl.

Her features were like those of an exquisitely crafted antique doll, impressive ringlets of a vivid red—judging by looks alone she's an unblemished pretty girl, but… Why is it?

The impression I gathered from that child was 'eerie'.

More like she lacked something any human should have… When I looked at that child, it's like some baseless anxiety overwhelmed my chest.

"My bad, but I don't have the time to get acquainted with you, so I won't call you by pet names at all. I'm sorry, but I have something scheduled for later."

At worst, if a battle starts, I'll summon Zonmi and settle it in one swoop.

"—Give Kyouko back."

Once I threatened her like that, Noelle burst into a theatrical uncanny laughter,

"Aha♪ You say amusing things. That I return her even though this child is already mine?"

Those were very significant words she said.

"…"

I felt uneasy about Noelle's words, but I walked up to Kyouko.

"?"

Surprising. Certainly she should have summoned a monster, but contrary to my expectations, Noelle didn't show any signs of moving.

"Dust Pain."

So. She simply brought the ring she was wearing near her mouth and chanted that in an indifferent tone.

“Uuu… Ga!”

As soon as Noelle muttered whatever those words, Kyouko’s body started twitching in agony.

“Oi. You alright!?”

Suddenly from nowhere there appeared countless black particles that surrounded Kyouko.

I tried to clear them away by using my jacket, that I took off, but none of the particles that appeared one by one gave signs of disappearing.

“Ku!”

Panicking, I tried to hit her in the back, but Kyouko’s seizure didn’t gave signs of getting better.

“… Uu!… Gu!”

“Didn’t I say it? She’s already my property. If you value that child’s life, it’d be better that you didn’t get closer. Too much energy could kill her♡”

On Noelle's middle finger; who showed a triumphant mood, there was a black ring I’ve seen somewhere.

That ring… It’s something I saw on my previous battle. A ring that forcibly enslaves a monster against its will.

Enforce Ring.

Also, taking a closer look at the rope Kyouko was bound with, it was the same kind Iris was captured with before.

But among monster tamers, possession of these items was forbidden—

This girl… Is a Black Tamer?

"…Could it be!?"

A very bad premonition crossed my mind.

When I slowly directed my eyes to Kyouko's finger—she was wearing the same ring as Noelle.

"You… Could it be, a contract with Kyouko…"

"Kyah♪ Do you understand with this? The Enforce Ring lets me have power over an enslaved monster's life and death. If I keep sending her pain like this, what will happen to her?… Can you picture it?"

"…"

It seems that what Noelle has just said could be true.

In any case. Even if I suppose Enforce Rings don't have a function to take lives, after seeing Kyouko's suffering a while ago, that had enough weight as a threat.

"Haru… I'm sorry."

Astonished by the unbelievable development, Kyouko, with a meek expression, muttered in a thin voice.

"Don't worry. You have no reason to apologize."

"… Nope. That's wrong. This, you know? It's divine punishment."

"…Divine punishment?"

Parroting her words as a question, Kyouko's eyes became red and swollen,

"I… It was said by dad… I'd be introduced to a new contract partner.

However, I wouldn't like to make a contract with someone other than Haru… So as to not say that, I tried to snatch away the ghoul's contract. I intended to say it yesterday night, but… I… It scares me to be hated by you."

"… I see."

So recently, Kyouko seemed strange because of that.

I don't know how snatching a contract and making me a bentou or showing me her panties can relate to each other, but… In Kyouko's way, her behavior should be well thought of.

Since to take advantage of someone who's cornered requires coldness.

"I had decided that my first contract was reserved for Haru… Why did this need to happen, I wonder…"

"… Don't worry. Enforce is not a proper contract. I'll rescue you in a flash."

Well. What do I do?

Until I came here, I—felt that I had to take Kyouko back, even if by force.

However, it doesn't look like this could be so easily resolved.

It's no wonder. Since Noelle has power over Kyouko's life and death, I can't employ underhanded methods. Since if I fail to keep her in a good mood, she doesn't need a reason to kill Kyouko.

Here with, I the only way is this one trump card. Even summon, it's very likely it's not allowed. **(!)**

"Have you finished with your last chat? I have gotten tired of waiting."

"—Sorry for making you wait. We've just finished."

Nevertheless.

Even if the situation is heavily unfavorable, I wouldn't say there is no hope.

“Then… What do I have to do to free Kyouko?”

I had a reason to ask with so much confidence.

Let’s think about it.

Had Noelle’s aim been simply taking my life, she needn’t do it in such a roundabout way.

Her aim was not killing.

In that case, I may be able to save Kyouko by negotiating.

“Aha♪ It’s a relief you seem so perceptive~”

Noelle laughed with innocence while glaring with cruelty,

“M—, that’s right. If so, what about this? From now on, you’ll risk your life by fighting the monsters I’ll summon.”

“…?”

This girl… What the heck it’s now…?

“Ah, Of course, it’s forbidden to use summon to call for monsters. It’s a promise. If you can defeat my monsters, I’ll give you this child back.”

“Have you lost your mind? There’s no way a regular human can defeat—”

“If it’s you, you can. Or rather, if you cannot win, it will be troublesome.”

As soon as Noelle said that meaningful thing with her face shrouded in darkness, she loudly shouted towards her ring,

“Summon—Killer Mantis.”

And, the next instant.

From nowhere appeared a huge mantis monster with a length of 7 meters.

… No, looking closer it was not a regular mantis.

That monster, equipped with 2 scythes, 6 legs & 8 eyes, like a cross-breed between a mantis and a tarantula, had quite the terrifying appearance.

Haha… Is this a joke?

There's no way a flesh-and-blood human would win against thi…

"Uo!?"

…It seems it's not the right time to get lost in despair.

The mantis monster swung down its huge scythe-like hands toward my head.

That was dangerous. Had I reacted a bit later, my head would have been severed from my body.

BROOOOOOOOOOM!

And, right after avoiding the attack.

From behind me came a thunderous noise, as if the earth was trembling.

"What… This…"

As I tried looking over my shoulder, the attack the mantis had released became a shock wave and the trees behind had been mowed down.

Unconsciously, I let out a bitter smile.

Haha… In addition to being in a desperate situation… The worst thing is that mantis… Seems it can release long-ranged attacks.

Well, what do I do?

I can’t get into close range. I can’t get out to long range.

… Become to this, there’s but a single way of taking it down.

Attacking from the sidelines without it noticing—that is, a surprise attack.

Of course I fully realize that it’s not so easy, but I have no time to spare.

As a result of thinking it out, I turned on my heels and dashed at full throttle.

WOOSH

The mantis released a shockwave with a sharp wind cutting sound, but I closely evaded it by bending my body at the same time the sound was made.

“A—ah. I expected something from you—. How unco—ol. You run away leaving the girl behind—?”

Despite Noelle babbling that, there’s no way I was fleeing without thinking it out.

I’m taking refuge in the copse, which had bad visibility.

As much as possible… So as to survive… A bit deeper…!!

Luckily, it seems I can win inside here thanks to my mobility.

After running for a while and getting out of sight of my enemy, I managed to put some distance in between us.

Hiding in the shade of the bushes, I laid in wait for my foe’s passing.

BROOOOM! There was noise of trees being mowed down.

… As I thought. It seems like the big bodied mantis has difficulty following me through the copse.

Hiding inside the copse was the correct decision.

It won't be easy taking it by surprise.

Once it gets careless, I'll throw a single hit with full strength.

…

……

Wait a minute.

Can I really cause any damage if I punch it with my full strength?

I've heard about it on the net or somewhere.

According to it. It seems a human being cannot win in a fight against a chimpanzee that weighs 30 kilos.

I think that mantis goes easily over ten times that weight.

If, by any chance, I manage to take it by surprise… could I give it a lethal hit?

Perhaps… No, totally impossible.

If I attack it, chances are good that the situation will be reversed against me.

So, what do I do? Should I only keep holding my breath like this…

Mm, Wait…?

That moment, something flashed in my mind.

To begin with, the thing about a human being incapable to defeat another animal is based on the premise of both of them being unarmed.

That's why, I may be able to win.

If I could get familiar with that mantis's powerful weapon that leaves you silent with its impotence—.

“Talking about weapons… There’s only this one.”

I’d say I only have a single chance.

I’m scared of dying. Extremely scared.

I don’t have a manga’s main character composure of “This guy… He’s in a life-or-death situation and he still laughs!?” or the like.

My limbs are trembling with force.

However, here ends the running from place to place.

That day, my trembling childhood friend said thus:

—If I keep trying without giving up, surely a way will open itself.

During yesterday’s evening shower, didn’t rays fall?

I lifted the perfect spoils from that—a fallen tree with a bit sharp pointy end.

It weighted about… 50 kilograms or so.

Should I look for something heavier? That doubt flashed through my mind, but I think that a bit heavier than this one and I’ll conversely lose mobility. While taking my time to search for a weapon, I couldn't let myself be discovered by the enemy.

The sound of falling trees showed me the enemy’s position.

I took a step. another step. I got closer to the source of the noise.

“Ouch…!!”

Luckily, the monster mantis didn’t notice me.

Without turning its eyes in my direction, it mowed down the trees that hampered its movements.

Just when the mantis swung downwards its arm to cut down the next tree.

Gathering my resolution, I, muffling my voice, targeted my opponents bosom and broke into a run.

—I'd say, not even a second after I started my run.

The mantis composite eyes, *TURN*, turned in my direction.

Crap, it noticed me.

However, due to the momentum of having started to run, I can't turn back.

The dice had been cast.

"Ku…"

Weird. I should have charged with considerable impetus, but—it didn't look like it.

That's no wonder. Since my weapon was deflected by the mantis's arm and was thrown far away.

…

……

The first attack has ended in failure, I've even lost my weapon… It fits inside the plan, but it's the worst pattern.

"Uoh!?"

In no time, the mantis started throwing attacks at me with each of its eight limbs.

Totally centered on evading, I barely managed to avoid its attacks.

“Eeh. You seem to have very good reaction speed. However, can you keep evading like that?”

Appearing from nowhere, Noelle muttered seemingly with admiration.

“… Shut your trap. Compared with Zonmi’s attacks, these look like there standing still.”

Despite me running my mouth, it didn’t seem like I could keep this for long.

For starters, it’s clearly obvious that it’s becoming more and more difficult for my eyes to keep following its slashes.

Is my speed falling, or is its speed raising?

When I took a glance at Noelle, she was staring with ecstatic eyes.

A sadist… is it? By gradually rising the speed, maybe she’s plotting torturing me to death.

“…Ah.”

And, earlier than expected, ‘that’ happened.

Before realizing it, my right arm was cut off while spurting fresh blood.

Aah. Well. That hurt. Incredibly so.

However, more than the physical pain, the fact of ‘I’ve lost an arm’ was worse to endure.

Why is that so?

Could it be because the right arm that has accompanied me for sixteen years was suddenly amputated?

No matter how much inhuman resilience monster tamers have. I can hardly picture an arm growing back like a lizard’s tail.

It could be the shock or it could be the stupefaction.

For a short while, I lost the willpower to even think.

“Kyaha♪ It’s checkmate. There really is no reason for me saying it, but… I couldn’t endure it♡”

Noelle started to breath roughly.

“That’s why, please. Get killed♪”

She passed the death sentence with bloodshot eyes.

Aah, one last thing. It seems I’ve made a great mistake.

The killing intent that makes one shiver that Noelle is emitting… It’s not much, but it’s not faked.

It seems that she had planned killing me since the start.

In that case, why doing it in such a roundabout way?

Before death, these questions kept popping into my head, but I don’t know what meaning they have.

Since I’ll die here.

Having given up on living, when I closed my eyes.

The mantis in front of me, *SNAP* disappeared from my sight.

Next instant. The mantis was blown off 10 meters while mowing down the trees with the impact, and like that, it ended up not even twitching.

I did… it?…

I’d say… My tactic of using the mantis’s shockwaves to cut off Kyouko’s restraints was successful.

Noelle, for an instant, with a face of not knowing what just happened, seemed to be dumbfounded.

This is my chance!

As I give some whipping to my damaged body and hastily cut distances with Noelle, I roughly grasped her right hand with my remaining left.

“My bad, but… It seems the one who did the checkmate before was me. Isn’t it right that you can’t kill Kyouko like this?”

“Good… It seems I made it in time.”

Kyouko and I trapped Noelle between us.

Noelle, immediately after blinking in surprise, before long, as if she had understood the situation, she showed a faint smile,

“I see. You are really amazing. I think I understand why onee-chan is so fond of you.

Plunging without second thoughts, did you use the shock waves of the killer mantis to free the Nephilim from the Catch Net? You had taken into account even the angle of the slash…. That’s one point to you."

It’s a miracle that this tactic has developed so well.

However, it doesn’t matter how low the chances were. I think that there was no other way for me to win.

Is that really true?

For starters, no matter how much you do your best, it’s impossible to fell a foe five times your size like a tree.

What I’d say I could do would be, at most, earning some time.

At the end of the day.

The weapons of monster tamers—are the monsters under them.

"The best someone could do in a desperate situation is keeping their cool. Courage is needed in order to, when needed, using yourself as a bait to find a way out. Your behavior has been impeccable and deserves praise."

"… Many thanks. But I'm not happy of being praised by you. Well, give up now and free Kyouko from the contract—"

"However, what you should be asking me is not that."

And, next instant.

A revolting scene unfolded before my eyes.

Noelle's arm, that I had kept tightly grasped up till now—changed shaped before my eyes.

I'd say this… It's undoubtedly rock.

Without knowing what to say myself, I don't want to admit it, but… I don't know how to express it.

Noelle—has transformed her arm into a rock clump.

What the heck is this…?

Noelle's right arm is clearly not human.

A monster enslaving monsters… Is that even possible?

Zonmi said before that 'humans are the only species able to become monster tamers'.

So, shouldn't this be a shocking fact?

Let's suppose. If there was another species apart from humans able to become monster tamers, there would be no reason for Zonmi and the lot to depend so much on me.

While I was troubled by this question with no answer, Noelle widely grinned.

“Then, you… Until when will you keep holding my hand?”

The next instant, my body was floating in the air.

I’d say that in order to free her hand, she must have swung her stone-turned arm. The movement was too fast, so I didn’t realize in the least something had happened.

“Gaha!?”

Crashing on the fallen trees unprepared, my bones creaked.

Aah. That’s bad…

I think that attack just now has taken out five or six of my ribs.

Moreover, I think I’ve lost too much blood due to missing an arm.

My sight is blurry and I’m dizzy. It doesn’t matter how many signals my brain sends, my body can’t lift a finger.

“Haru!?”

Could it be because I was so carelessly tossed with so much force?

As if worried about my condition, Kyouko came running without delay.

“Idiot… Even if you come here…”

This time, Kyouko should disregard me and engage in combat with Noelle asap.

After all, if she doesn’t—

“Kyaha♡ Foolish girl. You’re finished. Die like this♪”

As soon as Noelle approached right away the contract ring she was wearing to her mouth,

“Dust Pain”

She chanted mercilessly without hesitation.

The next instant. Black particles surrounded Kyouko and covered her.

This time there were twice… No, thrice the earlier amount, and it was clearly stronger than before.

“… Gah.”

As soon as Kyouko raised a soundless shout, she crouched on the ground like that.

How much pain, I honestly can’t say. She’s not threatening, she truly intends to kill her.

“… Please. Don’t kill her.”

What I managed to squeeze out by gathering what little willpower I had left were real honest thoughts.

“It’s fine whatever you do to me. I don’t mind if you want to boil or roast me. But, only Kyouko… I beg you, don’t kill her.”

“Could it be—, do you think I’d give in to that plea?”

“… I beg you.”

“Interesti—ng. Why would I had to listen to the words of a dead person—?”

Drooling all over; pleasure filled her face, Noelle stepped on my head.

“Aaaaan♡ That face is goooood!! That’s why I can’t stop killing yooooooooooooou!”

“…”

“Kyaha♪ Onii-chan, this is where you will die. But I can’t kill you now.

Since I want to see your pathetic face—. Killing you will come after that girl over there kicks the bucket!”

“Ha… ru…”

Kyouko mouthed my name without strength.

Those eyes tinged with despair were empty and lifeless.

Quickly… As quickly as possible… I must save Kyouko…

But… How do I save her?

It’s decided.

Why didn’t I realize something so easy?

The Noellehindrance, she shall die.

Making that decision inside my heart, next instant—

With a rumbling, there was the sound of something bursting open inside me.

What the heck. Isn’t this weird even if I am on death’s threshold?

I realized that my body temperature suddenly rose, and my heart was literally beating at about twice the normal speed.

My body was as hot as if I were inside flames.

Since a while ago… What the heck has been happening?

What’s with this power that’s gushing out from the depths of my body…?

…It’s gradual, but I feel like blood is circulating throughout my body.

For starters—let’s try to grab Noelle’s ankle that has been stepping on my head for a while with my right hand.

SPLAT It was the sound of flesh being smashed.

“Eh…?”

I thought it was a very stupid voice.

“Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouchouchouch!!”

I’ve only touched a bit the body of the girl before me, why does she raise such a fuss?

She’s noisy. I wish she’d shut up a bit.

Miraculously, getting up was very easy.

So as to silence the girl before me, I grabbed her right hand with full strength.

The sound of rocks cracking was heard. I’d say that, in order to protect her right hand she turned it into stone.

“Ha… ru…?"

For some reason, I thought things around me were boisterous, but the me right now didn’t pay it any mind.

My body is as hot as if I was burning.

Somehow, it seemed like my chest was being baked in an oven.

My magic power had exceeded the allowed levels since a while ago, and was crying to get out.

I have to let out even a bit of that excess magic power. If not, my skin will be charred by that excess magic power.

“… Aha. Now I’m mad. Thinking about it, wasn’t it a promise? If you could defeat my summoned monsters, I’ll give you the girl back. But, what a pity. Truth is, I don’t have only one monster…”

As soon as the girl yelled something, three monsters appeared in succession.

I’m surrounded.

The ones I’m stuck between left and right, are a carnivorous plant-like monster & that human-shaped bull-headed monster I’ve fought before, the Minotauros.

The third one that appeared was a stone monster that, as if protecting Noelle, loitered around her.

Were I the usual me, I’d be struck by despair, but, mysteriously, I didn’t feel like I’d lose.

It’s the first time I'd felt like this.

It’s a bit excessive… I feel like punishing someone.

As I was confused by this unknown feeling that surged from the bottom of my heart, countless plant roots surged from the ground that restrained my body.

It seems that, without me noticing, I was attacked by the enemy.

“Aha♪ An opening.”

The instant she muttered that, a strong impact run through my skull.

Without being able to resist, I sunk around fifty centimeters into the ground.

Looking at where the attack came from, there was the Minotauros brandishing its large axe.

… However, that axe seems to have suffered a chink beyond repair.

Strangely, it doesn’t hurt.

On the contrary, I couldn’t help but smile while thinking how to slaughter them.

“You are an unpleasant person till the end… What do you find so funny?”

It seems she has said something with a puzzled face, but words from outside didn’t enter my ears no more.

Moving by instinct, I closed distance with my prey.

The first target I’ve decided on is the carnivorous plant monster.

Warding off the countless roots that drew near and getting past its defenses, I simply smashed its stalk.

… What, it's finished?

Since it's become completely motionless, I think so.

The match had ended very quickly, but a fight of this degree is not enough.

Making that assessment, I decided on my next target.

The second one I chose as prey was the one who has just attacked me with its axe, the Minotauros.

If it's this one that hurt me before… No doubt, it will become interesting. My heart full of expectation, I dashed right to its chest full force—with the momentum, I cut off the Minotauros left arm.

As if cutting tofu with a knife, there was no feeling of resistance.

Only the Minotauro's spray of blood and yell were left.

That's weird, the Minotauros… Was it so weak?

Doubt crossed my mind, no matter how much I think, the outcome is the same.

In the end, not totally satisfied, I cut off all four of the Minotauro's limbs .

…What a letdown.

With my sharp as a blade right arm, I decapitated the Minotauros, who was already no more than a flesh daruma.

So, the last one left, the rocky monster was my last hope at the bottom of the box.

"… Stop."

Just when I was about to decide how to massacre the foe before me.

On my back, there was a pleasantly cool sensation.

It seems that someone is hugging me from behind.

Is that so… This is body warmth. I feel it awfully cold since my temperature is very high.

The heck. Do I know this warmth…?

“That fighting from before… You have to return to being human…”

This chap… What’s with that…

Saying it like that… Do I not look like a human?

…

……

Wha? But… Now that I mention it.

Too late, I feel uncomfortable on my own body.

I don’t know the reason why, but my right arm has turned into the shape of a huge reddish-brown blade.

That’s weird. Earlier, how could my cut off right arm grow back again?

Questions kept bubbling out, that moment.

“Geh!?”

As if dry ice had been forced deep inside my throat, I felt a throbbing pain inside my head.

THROB My heart raised a big beat.

When I opened my eyes, my right arm had returned to its usual color.

What the heck… is this…

‘That’ from a while ago… Did I see it wrong?

“… That’s good. I… Had Haru died like that…”

“Uoh!? Wh-why have you hugged me that all of a sudden!?”

“Eh… Sudden…?”

“I see… That’s right. The price of power are the memories?…”

Eeeeerm. Who’s this?

This gothic loli dressed pretty girl—.

I’m still confused, but frantically racking my brain, I—managed to retrieve a faint string of memory.

… That’s right. How could I forget something so important?

Her name is Noelle. The mastermind behind Kyouko’s abduction who sent a message to me.

And, right when I recalled her name, memories of the battle that just happened unfolded inside my head.

"That's weird. I wasn't informed of this, but… It may be a bother, but I must go tell onee-chan asap…"

Right when Noelle was grumbling to herself,

"But, before that… I shall slay those who know about his power."

She drew the ring near her mouth.

"… Darn."

Noelle must not use that ring.

Quickly… If she's not stopped somehow or other… Kyouko's life will be in danger…!!

"Dust Pain."

Nevertheless.

The instant she chanted, something totally unexpected took place before my eyes.

"Guh. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouchouchouch…"

Contrary to what I expected, it was Noelle who started grasping her chest in pain.

And… Is this what they call a point for me?

The contract ring that, until a while ago, was wrapped in a dusky murkiness—was now just dazzlingly shining.

"O-oi. You alright…?"

Noelle's manner of suffering is not normal.

Since I can't bear to watch it even if she's my foe, I rushed to her side and,

“Shut your trap! Don’t touch my body!”

Raged Noelle.

Next. I felt as if my surrounding had gotten darker.

Looking up, the golem’s giant hand palm was about to smash me any moment now with force, isn’t it near the top of my head?

Ah, crap. I’ll die here.

I will, in the end, be denied the victor’s mercy and killed… Isn’t it an inhuman way of dying, even if I say so myself?

As I regretted my own rashness.

BOOM! With a sound like something exploding, the golem was thrown away.

“Really… Unreliable, like always.”

Holy crap… What kind of power is this?

When I go to save someone, in the end I do nothing but get saved by that very person.

Kyouko—my childhood friend has felled an opponent ten times her own size with a single dropkick.

This hit, clearly—was more powerful than the one she sent away the mantis with earlier.

By any chance, could Kyoko’s contract ring that, the same as Noelle’s, was faintly shining have something to do with it?

… Let’s stop getting deep in thought for now. There should be another chance for detailed thinking.

“… Che.”

As soon as Noelle took off her now useless contract ring, tossing it with force against the ground,

“I’m not in the mood to fight anymore today… Later, onii-chan.”

Just when she tossed her parting words seemingly indifferent, she merged into the darkness of the night like that.

“… Are you letting her flee?”

If I let her get away before my eyes, chances are good that she’ll put me in danger again.

When, giving a whipping to my exhausted body, I tried to pursue after her.

My vision strained, my legs gave out.

“Haru!?”

Aah. Now that I think, today all along… did nothing but fighting.

I’m suddenly tormented by a monumental despondency as if I had been working for three days and three nights straight without rest.

My vision slowly darkened.

Having used up all of my internal magic power, I—like that, I lost consciousness as if going into deep slumber.

Insect tribe: Large mantis **LV**: 8

Physical strength: C
Power: C
Speed: A

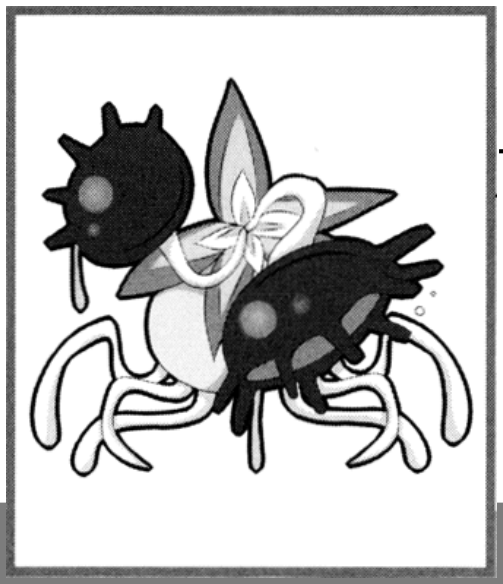
Underworld bug monster.

It attacks with its sickles.

Even though it has wings, it doesn't fly very well.

Serial number: 122

Plant tribe: Killer plant **LV**: 11



Physical strength: B
Power: C
Speed: C

Ferocious flower monster.

It hunts by emitting a sweet fragance.

It can command all of its numerous tendrils at the same time.

Serial number: 026

Epilogue - Wish to the night sky—

Where is this place…

Having exhausted my internal energy and becoming trashed, I fell into a pleasant slumber.

“My… My wish is…”

Beside me, the yukata-clad Kyouko from elementary school kept writing her wish on a tanzaku with glittering eyes.

This situation, this scene.

They seem vaguely familiar.

It seems like the continuation of the dream from the other time.

“… Finished!!”

Let’s see.

Now that I think of it, last time I woke up before being able to check Kyouko’s wish.

I’m a bit interested in what could have the Kyouko from childhood wished for.

Peeking at the writing on Kyouko’s tanzaku—

Let me become Chiharu-kun’s bride.

That was written in round and cute letters.

Oi, oi. A sudden marriage without going out first?

These elementary schoolers… Their scariness knows no limits.

“Eh.”

Suddenly receiving a reverse proposal, the me back then was left with his mouth agape but,

"… Marrying you? Whatever the circumstances, isn't that too rushed? We're still elementary schoolers."

After a brief silence, she answered me with a quiet voice.

"I-it's not rushed at all! Kids these days are precocious, something like this is normal!"

"…"

Kids these days are so precocious, either I'm mistaken or that's not something a kid would say.

"… That so? But, my bad. As expected, something like marriage… We don't know what future will bring."

I gently averted it.

Nevertheless, with her face showing her displeasure,

"Liar."

"… Yes?"

"Chiharu-kun. Meanie… Marry me… You've just promised me…"

"Wait a minute. When have I said that!?"

"… You didn't say, you wrote! Chiharu-kun wished for us two to be together forever!"

"It's true that that's what I wrote on my tanzaku, but… Don't tell me that being together forever=marriage?"

"It does. Being together forever, even after death… Being together in the same tomb?"

"Eh."

"In other words, it means marriage!"

"… You see, Kyouko. To begin with, that was only a simile… *COUGH COUGH*"

Kyouko's glance filled with killing intent overcame me and silenced me.

Pathetic, even if I say so myself…

"So. I want to propose once again officially. Then, I think I'll be able to endure Chiharu being far away…"

"…"

The me back then blatantly averted his gaze and ignored her. It seems he contrives to keep being silent.

Nevertheless. My intentions being futile, Kyouko, with a shadow cast over her face,

"Breach the engagement… And in compensation, 3 million…"

She said those dangerous words.

Eeerrrm. What the heck is this kid saying?

Are you that? One of those women in their forties desperate for catching a husband?…

If left like this, it will bring problems in the future. The me back then decided to postpone the matter.

"… Understood. I promise."

"Really!?"

"Yeah. But on the condition of it being once I'm an adult."

"How much of an adult!? With how many years!?"

"If we say adult, perhaps… When I'm in high school?"

… That was easy.

If I had to make an excuse, I'd say that high school students seemed like very adult existences to the me back then.

The me of right now, having become a high schooler, could naturally be involved in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship… That kind of unsuspicious belief that's not different from innocence.

Me from elementary school… I'm sorry.

Truth is… that couldn't be.

"Understood. If that's the case, in return… I'll entrust this to you, Haru."

"Mm. What's this…"

What she took out next was a pendant shaped like a key attached to a silver chain.

Wha… This design, I remember it from somewhere.

Could this be then… The same pendant I found at home!?

"This is the key to the treasure box I've brought. I was thinking on putting our tanzaku inside and then bury it under some tree."

"And why the heck would we do that?"

When I asked, Kyouko let out a smile as pretty as a midsummer sunflower,

"Because it's more romantic like that."

"… Is that so?"

Being a man, I don't understand that reasoning in the least.

"Yeah. It's much better like that! After Chiharu-kun, as promised, proposes to me in high school, we'll come back to retrieve it. And we'll say 'aah, that's right, this was the very beginning of what happened today' once we meet the tanzaku with our eternally unchanged feelings…

What, isn't it romantic?"

Romantic or what not… So much sweetness will make me go bald.

"I too will promise something. By high school… I'll have become cuter and lovelier than anyone."

With that dazzling smile from Kyouko, my consciousness was returned to reality.

I see. That pendant I found by chance at home had that kind of meaning.

However. I had doubts.

How could I forget something so important?

It's true that I have a tendency for forgetfulness higher than others, but I don't think that something on this can be excused with something like 'I'm forgetful'.

While filled with doubts, without any time to give them a thought, my consciousness was pulled to reality.

"Haru… Haru…"

SHAKE SHAKE My body shook. I was being shaken.

"Kyouko…?"

"That's good. I… thought you wouldn't wake up again."

SQUEEZE My body was tightly embraced.

The body of my childhood friend from whom I haven't felt a hug in a very long time, compared to when she was in elementary school, it had become tender and charming, but unfortunately I didn't have time to spare enjoying the situation right now.

"Errr. Kyouko…Afterwards, what happened with the battle?"

"… Could it be, you don't remember? That we could win thanks to the clever tactic devised by Haru?"

"I did something… Part of my memories of the battle are fuzzy. Perhaps. My body, didn't something change?"

"… Change?"

"Like a part of my body becoming red."

"…!!"

Kyouko seemed to have become speechless for as moment, but, right after, she smiled awkwardly,

"Ahaha. What's that? Your skin has been always skin-colored! Weren't you daydreaming?"

"… Aah. Yeah. Is that so?"

Like Kyouko said, maybe it's because I'm tired.

The darkness of the forest, being mentally cornered… It must have been a hallucination or a dream.

When I looked to my watch, it was already around 8 pm.

It's been a whole hour since the closing. The Saegusa festival should be in the middle of closing its stalls.

"…Should we return?"

In the end, I couldn't keep my promise to Zonmi and the others?

But, well, since I've been involved in an incident like this one, there's no way.

I think it's lucky enough that I've kept my life intact.

"Wait!"

As I turned back, I was stopped by a tug on my sleeve.

"What's the matter?"

“Truth is. Haru, About that pendant you are wearing…”

“Aah, You mean this? Truth is, I’ve just—”

“Have you remembered!?”

Kyouko leant forward too close.

“No, it’s not like that…”

Truth is, I’ve just remembered about it, but I ended up lying on the spur of the moment.

Why is that?

There’s no way Kyouko could be serious about a promise from so long ago, but…

Me remembering about this pendant =me remembering about promising to marry, that’s the same.

I feel bashful about not denying it, how’d I say, after this, I wouldn’t know what face to make before her when we met.

“Do you know something about this?”

“Haru may have forgotten already, but… To tell the truth, it was me who gave you that pendant long ago.”

“… Is that so?”

“What’s more. There’s a box that makes a set with that key, we put inside some keepsakes together, then buried it near here. Wanna go now to dig it up?”

“No. I’ll pass. Today I’m tired.”

“Really!? I’m glad. Then, let’s go to dig it up♪”

“Wait a minute! When did I say a word about going… Gueeeeeeh! Understood! I’m going! You are winging my neeeeeeck!”

I was dragged by the scruff of my neck like a kitten.

That's the giant tribe for you… What's with this power!?

It seems that the basis of my disposition of being unable to oppose girls, either now or in the past, it hasn't changed a bit.

"I found it! I found it!"

The box Kyouko said, as it was in a shallower place than it seemed 5 years ago, could be found very fast.

It's nothing more than a supposition, but could it be that Kyouko, so as to bask in memories, came here sometimes to tend to the box?

If it wasn't like that, I doubt it would have been so easy to dig up something buried so long ago.

"… Is that so? That's good."

I had mixed feelings.

Don't tell me that Kyouko… Is she serious about a promise from so long ago?

Let's say Kyouko asks me to marry her, how could I reply to her?

"…"

Kyouko put a dumbfounded expression.

The moment I cast my eyes upon the two sheets of tanzaku in her hands, I could understand why.

I'd say the soil moisture must have changed the quality of the paper. They are in a state where the writing cannot be read.

"What are those? The keepsakes you mentioned…?"

"… Yeah. They can't be read anymore, but here there were written very precious memories."

"… Is that so?"

Kyouko got for a moment into an 'absentminded' state, but her eyes promptly shining brightly again,

"Yeah, There has been a slight change in plans, but… No problem. This is enough for now."

"?"

"Haru, could you stretch your right hand?"

"Why so sudden?"

As Kyouko said, I reached my hand to her.

As soon as I felt something cold in my fingertip, the surrounding darkness was drowned by a pale light that just spilled out.

"Wha. How can this…!?"

Of course, I got surprised.

This light is the same I saw back when I made a contract with Iris.

Then, this should be… A Contract Ring.

Why does Kyouko have a Contract Ring?… I have no proof, but there was only one I knew of.

The aftermath of the battle. I think I saw this same light coming from Noelle's ring.

Could it be… Maybe Noelle's Enforce Ring somehow changed its nature and became a Contract Ring?

If my theory of the Enforce Ring changing into a Contract Ring is true, then the pain of Noelle when she tried to use the ring is comprehensible.

Of course this is nothing more than a simple guess, but… Is that what happens when you give a command bypassing the free will of the monster partner? As a consequence of asking for a function of the Enforce Ring already turned into a Contract Ring, she suffered that backlash…?

If I think like that, the flow of events can be explained.

“I too don’t understand it very well, but… I’ve heard something like that. For a monster tamer to choose a partner, besides the ring, they say the contract partner has to choose it from its own volition.”

“… I see.”

Turning away her glance, Kyouko said while fidgety entwining her fingers.

“On fairy-tales passed around at the Netherworld, two people separated by an unwanted contract can be reunited by the will of the ring… There are tons of endings like that. But for that to actually happen… a strong relationship of mutual trust, how do I put it… it seems deep bonds that anyone would envy are needed…”

“…”

If what Kyouko says is correct, is this ring she put on me without warning something like a living being? If you said to the me from before something as unscientific as ‘the ring is alive’, I would have laughed.

But now, I’m someone who doesn’t find it something that impossible.

… For good or bad, I’m surrounded by girls that are themselves unscientifical existences.

“Chiharu… What are you doing in a place…”

Turning my head in reaction to the familiar voice, Zonmi, breathing heavily, dashed before me.

Am I overthinking things?

Her expression seems a bit relieved.

“Ku… Being outran by a lowly ghoul—”

“Pant… Pant… Onii-chan… I found you… By the way, Iris-chan and the zombie run very fast…”

And, it’s not only Zonmi.

“You guys… Why the heck…!?”

“That’s good… You’re safe and sound. I could feel it through the ring. Chiharu’s magic power grew until strange levels and reached a state of being out of control—. Chiharu, what has happened here?”

“Eeeerm, you see…”

“!?”

When I started talking, Zonmi ‘s glance fell on my hand.

Zonmi, after being left with a face of incredulity, her eyes opened wide, started trembling,

“… You don’t say!? Chiharu and the Nephilim, a contract…!? How could it be if you didn’t have a ring… Tell me your explanation, if you have one!"

She inquired with a bloodcurdling grimace.

“…”

Well. From where should I start explaining?

To explain the reason behind our contract, I first should tell about Kyouko’s capture.

And then the battle against the Black Tamer.

That Kyouko was put under Enforce.

A monster enslaving monsters… that I have personally seen such an irregular situation.

If I start explaining from the start, no matter how much time I get, it won’t be enough.

As, bewildered, I couldn’t look her in the eyes,

“Hey, zombie! That doesn’t matter!”

Manami objected in a loud voice.

“Wha. Isn’t this unrelated to you, little sister!? Be quiet! You tend to act in strange ways… That’s weird! Even when, just in case, so that you, being human, weren’t exposed to danger, I ran here at full speed…”

“…”

I see. So that’s the reason why Zonmi is out of breath?

Still, she seems to have endured it quite well, but how the heck could Manami have kept up Zonmi’s pace running at full speed…

“It’s SO related to me! I too am curious about the ring, but better than that, shouldn’t we confirm right now the state of onii-chan’s chastity!?”

“…”

“…”

“…”

“Wh-why is everyone wordless!? Could it be being deep in the mountain!? The darkness!? Are you boys and girls in heat!? I’d say that’s the only thing it can be!!”

… As usual, this little sister of mine has to butt in on such an important moment in a catastrophic way.

When, before my sister oddities, I felt the urge of running away.

From nowhere, *WHOO~~~~~SH*, fireworks burst in the night sky with a loud noise like flowers in full bloom.

“Pretty…”

Seeing the fireworks being launched one after the other, Kyouko let out a word of admiration.

“… Are these those rumored so-called fireworks I’ve heard of? I’ve seen them a couple of times in photos and recordings, but seeing is believing. They are as appealing as they say.”

“Kukkuku. Wouldstn’t thou say it’s a good performance for being humans?… Of course, there’s nothing in this world that holds a candle before our flames.”

I'd say it’s the first time Zonmi and Iris seeing fireworks.

Enraptured by the beauty of the fireworks… Rather, just startled by the scale and noise of the fireworks.

“Muu~. And now fireworks!? In the end, what was the outcome of onii-chan’s nighttime firework launching!?”

“… Hey? But, isn’t it weird? The time of the show should have been over a while ago… Why are they launching them now?”

Ignoring my sister’s nonsense, I voiced my thoughts.

“Well. I’m not very well informed on the matter, but I’ve heard a student without common sense, while shouting strange words like ‘events for the enjoyment of riajuus like this should be erased from this world’ or something, interfered with the launching…. A very disturbing fellow.”

“… Is that so?”

Wasn’t that undoubtedly Youhei!?

Darn… That Youhei… How rash…

Nevertheless. By chance, thanks to that guy delaying the launching, we could have everyone gather like this on the best spot and see the fireworks.

Doesn’t that mean we should be grateful to Youhei?

"Well, then… You've ended up eluding the talk. I'll question you in detail once we come back home."

"… Aah. If it's like that, I'll help."

"At any rate. This means you've become the second partner. Nephilim."

Said Zonmi strongly remarking the 'second' part.

"… But in my case, I won't let our relationship stop on a partner level."

After that declaration, Kyouko strongly pressed my arm against her breasts.

"O-oi…"

I'd say that, after the contract, she's gotten in very high spirits, but her unusually proactive approach makes me unconsciously embarrassed.

"Wha-whawhawha. What exactly does that meaaan!?"

Zonmi's yell was cruelly drowned by the fireworks' noise—.

Apart from the fireworks launched to the night sky, a womanly— violent battle's sparks were scattered between those two.